

NOVEL 5

Written by
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THE MOST
HERETICAL
LAST BOSS QUEEN

FROM VILLAINESS TO SAVIOR



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5

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

Characters



❧Pride❧

The firstborn princess of the kingdom of Freesia. At age of eight, she realized she'd been reborn as the last boss queen from an otome game called "ORL" that she played in her past life. Pride is determined to do all she can to prevent the tragedies the love interests experience in the game, as well as work tirelessly for her country and people. Her wit and combat skills endow her with such extraordinary power, it's like she's cheating. Pride possesses the special power of precognition.

❧Stale❧

The firstborn prince and Pride's younger adoptive brother. A love interest in the original otome game. Stale possesses the special power of teleportation. He signed a subordination contract with Pride.

❧Arthur❧

The vice captain of the Eighth Squadron of the Freesian royal order of knights. A love interest in the original otome game. Arthur possesses the special power to cure all diseases. He serves as one of Pride's imperial knights.

❧Tiara❧

The second-born princess and Pride's younger sister. Delicate and beautiful, Tiara is also the heroine of the otome.

❧Rosa❧

Pride's mother and queen of Freesia. Rosa possesses the special power of precognition.

❧Albert❧

Pride's father and prince consort of Freesia.

❧Vest❧

Pride's uncle and the queen's adoptive younger brother. Serves as the Freesian seneschal.

❧Gilbert❧

Prime minister of Freesia. A love interest in the original otome game. Gilbert possesses the special power of age control.

❧Roderick❧

Commander of the Freesian royal order of knights and Arthur's father. Possesses the special power to nullify all attacks with bladed weapons.

❧Clark❧

Vice commander of the Freesian royal order. A good friend of Roderick's.

Alan

Captain of the First Squadron of the royal order. One of Pride's imperial knights.

Eric

Vice captain of the First Squadron of the royal order. One of Pride's imperial knights.

Callum

Captain of the Third Squadron of the royal order. One of Pride's imperial knights.

Harrison

Captain of the Eighth Squadron of the royal order.

Val

A former thief who entered into a fealty contract with Pride. Currently works as a delivery man. Possesses the special power of earth sculpting.

Khemet

A former orphan. Possesses the power to amplify others' special abilities. Sefekh's little brother.

Sefekh

A former orphan. Possesses the power to produce water. Khemet's older sister.

The Kingdom of Anemone

Leon

The firstborn prince of Anemone. Pride's ex-fiancé. One of the love interests in the original otome game.

The United Hanazuo Kingdom

Cedric

The prince and younger brother of the Cercian king. A love interest in the original otome game. Cedric came to Freesia himself to first propose the alliance.

Lance

King of Cercis. Cedric's older brother. A good friend of Yohan's.

Yohan

King of Chinensis and a very religious man. A good friend of Lance's.

Vocabulary

The Kingdom of Freesia: A great kingdom ruled by queens with the special power of precognition. The only country in the world where people with special powers are born.

The Kingdom of Anemone: A neighboring country of Freesia. One of the biggest trading hubs in the world.

The United Hanazuo Kingdom: A country founded by the union of Cercis, a land rich with gold, and Chinensis, a land famous for its minerals.

Rajah Empire: The largest slave-producing country. They expand their territory by enslaving people and invading other lands.

Our Ray of Light (ORL): The otome game Pride played in her past life. This series was so popular, it was later given an anime adaptation.

Higeki no Genkyoutonaru Saikyou Gedou Rasubosu
Joou wa Taminotameni Tsukushimasu. Vol. 5
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Publication rights for this English edition arranged
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Information regarding the distribution and purchase of
digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
at digital@gomanga.com.

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ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-88843-071-2
Printed in Canada
First Printing: December 2023
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter 0:

The Unrealized Future of Two Years Ago

“I CAN’T TAKE any more of this!”

I flipped the table and let out a strained cry. *Wait, what am I doing?!*

“Calm down, Alan. You can raise all the hell you want, but it won’t make any difference.”

“How am I supposed to be calm, Callum?!”

I stomped on the toppled table as I shouted at Callum. My shoulders heaved with each breath, and my stomach gave a sick lurch. I glared at him, sitting there in his fancy chair like always, with his hands folded on top of his desk. I was so... I was so...

I’m Alan Berners. How did I end up like this...? Oh, that’s right. I’m extremely pissed off.

“It’s all that demon’s fault! We keep losing more knights every year, and it’s not just because no one’s applying. The knights we already have keep dying!”

Yelling didn’t help abate my anger in the slightest. I slammed my fists on a different table, snapping it in half.

“Shut your mouth, Alan. Not even children can escape the death penalty these days if they insult the queen.”

“That’s really all you have to say, Callum? We lost Commander Roderick...and all the new recruits. Then, just when Vice Commander Clark was trying to get the order back on its feet, we lost him too! Are you happy the higher-ups are out of the way? Please tell me you’re not that sort of guy, Callum.”

I ground my teeth as the ever-composed Callum faced me with infuriating calm. I snatched the front of his shirt and bared my teeth at him. Yet he coolly returned my stare and refused to fight back, no matter how I tugged at him.

“Vice Commander Alan, do you really think I’m not angry?”

Vice Commander. The title still sat awkwardly on me, and I wasn’t used to it.

Even so, Callum's response made me release his shirt and stumble back a step. It had been so long since I last saw that look in his eyes.

"We knights... The knights I was once so proud to count myself among are now a source of fear for the Freesian people," Callum said. "We fight wars against our neighboring countries, round up innocent civilians for their rare and superior special powers in the name of the queen, and sometimes even purge Freesian citizens who threaten her. We carry out that sentence ourselves, over and over again!"

He looked down at his hands and balled them into fists to quiet the tremble running through his entire body. An intense wave of emotion had overwhelmed him, and it was clear as day that those feelings were directed at himself.

"This isn't...this isn't why...I became a knight!"

Callum howled in despair and slumped his head. The tremble passed into his shoulders as he released his fists. He shot me a piercing gaze the rest of the knights never glimpsed.

"Still...we can't just abandon our duties as knights! We share the same will as our brothers! You and I are the only people who can protect them!"

I understood what he was saying; I also cared deeply for the knights who fought for our shared ideals. And yet, I knew Callum's desperation to protect his subordinates was about more than just that.

Arthur Beresford, son of our late Commander Roderick, had joined the order as a new recruit. He was blessed with unbelievable talents. Within two or three years, he would surely climb the ranks of the main forces. From what I'd heard, Callum himself had been with Arthur at the moment the commander lost his life. Callum wanted to protect the commander's brokenhearted son if he couldn't protect the commander himself. Clark's last wish had been for us to look after Arthur in his place should the boy ever decide to enlist—and indeed he had.

All of us wanted to keep Arthur safe. *But still!*

"Just think about it for a second!" I told him. "Right now, the knights support you and me much more than that queen. We could easily round them all up to

overthrow—”

“Oh dear. And I thought this was the last place I would ever hear talk of a rebellion.”

A menacing giggle sounded behind me. I turned to find a girl standing in the doorway with a large group of guards at her back. My blood went cold.

“Your Majesty! How did you get here?!” I asked.

“I have an incredible slave. Do you really think you and your ilk could overthrow me? I have a special power bestowed upon me by God Himself.”

Callum stood from his chair with a lifeless whimper, letting it clatter to the floor behind him. The queen’s lips stretched wide into an unnatural grin.

“What am I supposed to do about all this?” she said, voice dripping with mock lament. “I’ll have to execute you both, but I’ll be losing even more knights this time—and another commander and vice commander, at that.”

Her smile wasn’t one of regret at all. Instead, it looked like unbridled joy.

If the queen’s going to end my life, I’ll take her down with me.

When Callum caught me gripping my sword, he motioned with his hand for me to stop. Then he stepped in front of me and dropped to his knee before the queen.

“Please wait, Your Majesty,” he said. “This is a result of my own failure in leadership. If anyone is to be punished, it should be me and me alone. I am commander of the order.”

“What?! You fool! How could you?!” I snapped.

The queen snapped her fingers and something struck my back, the violent impact shaking my whole body. Someone had appeared behind me and shoved me down without warning. My chin hit the ground, and when I craned my neck to look behind me, I saw a young boy pinning me down. He was holding a blade to my throat and glaring with flat, dead eyes.

Callum balked. “Prince Stale, you’re—?! ”

Prince Stale?! The firstborn prince of this country was also the seneschal who

served at the queen's side. In the blink of an eye, the other guards rushed over to help pin me down too.

It was no use. This kingdom was rotten to the core.

"Let's see... So you want to shoulder all the responsibility, hm?" Queen Pride said. "That's fine with me. It'll make things *more fun*." She looked right at me as she uttered the final words. Then she ordered one of her guards to hand her a sword. "Stay put and look down, Commander."

She drew her sword and approached Callum, strolling up to him as though she were out for a walk in the palace gardens.

Callum lowered his head. He was truly prepared to accept his fate.

"Alan," he said, "look after Arthur...and all the other knights. You're the only one I can count on." He closed his eyes, refusing to look at me as he spoke.

"No, don't do it! If you're gonna kill anyone, kill me! I'm the one who said it all! Callum, you've gotta make a run for it!"

I rasped out plea after plea, but Callum held still while the queen paced toward him, her smile twitching at the corners. Bone-chilling giggles bubbled past her lips. She stood by Callum and raised her sword aloft.

"Stop... Kill me instead!" I screamed, my voice filled with rage and contempt. "Run, Callum! Run!"

Slash!

It only took a second. A spray of red exploded outward, and my friend's head rolled over the floor toward me.

"Ah ha... Ha ha ha... Ah ha ha ha ha ha!"

The queen cackled, gleeful even as Callum's blood soaked her garments through.

Ah, this laughter... Is this how she laughed when she killed all those innocent civilians? Why?! Why did Callum have to die?! I'm the one who was planning the rebellion! Callum tried to stop me! So why? Why? Why? Why?!

"All right! Who's next?"

“What?!”

The queen’s eyes turned from Callum’s body, which was still spewing blood, to me. “What do you mean, ‘what?’ You’re part of the rebellion too. Don’t tell me you thought I was going to obey the dying wish of some criminal?! Ah ha ha! You really expected me to spare you?! What an idiot!”

Her smile was still jerking with little outbursts of maniacal jubilation. I tried to break free, but I couldn’t move a muscle with the guards holding me down.

She raised her sword over my head, sneering down at me. “Give my regards to the commander.”

“Go to hell! Callum didn’t do anything... He left them all for me to look after!! The order, and Arthur too!”

Callum’s words echoed in my mind. How we had to protect the knights; how we were the only ones who could do it. The man was right. We had a duty to protect them! But we were about to fail, and it was all my fault.

“Alan, look after Arthur...and all the other knights. You’re the only one I can count on.”

He left them in my care! Callum wanted me to take care of Arthur and the knights! He said I was the only one he could count on! So I can’t just...just...

Tears of regret sprang to my eyes. I clenched my jaw to stop it from trembling, but it was no use. The queen just snickered at me, enjoying my feckless struggle to escape.

“I’m glad I let you go second,” she said, amused.

Damn it! Damn it! Damn it all!

I couldn’t stand what I’d done. In the end, I was powerless. I couldn’t support Callum as his vice commander, I couldn’t watch over Arthur as the three previous commanders wanted, and I couldn’t protect the new recruits—let alone the other knights or the Freesian people. I would die a shameful death.

I just wish I could have protected them.

I wanted to protect them. I wanted to protect them. I wanted to protect them! I wanted to protect them! I wanted to protect them! I wanted to protect

them! I wanted to protect them! I wanted to protect them! I wanted to protect them!

But I couldn't!

The queen raised her sword. Just as it connected with my neck, I tried to glare at her in one last act of—

Slash!

Chapter 1:

The Blasphemous Princess and the Start of the War

THERE ONCE was an otome game series called *Our Ray of Light*, or ORL, as the fans called it. The series was popular enough to get an anime adaptation. These games were a secret pleasure of mine in the eighteen ordinary years I spent in my past life.

Never could I have imagined that I would reincarnate as the dastardly last boss queen of the first game in the series. The evil queen was the source of many tragedies, and she inflicted deep, permanent scars on the hearts of the love interests. By the end of the game, she received the ultimate punishment for her crimes.

When I realized that I had been reborn as this person, I set about preventing the tragedies that happened to the characters in the game. The love interests didn't have to lose people they cared about. In this world, they could live their lives without those soul-deep emotional wounds.

Still, there were tragedies awaiting these characters that I wasn't responsible for. The protagonist of this world was the only ray of light capable of salvaging their hearts.

That was how I ended up in my current predicament.

"Tomorrow we will confront the enemy nations of Copelandii, Alata, and Rafflesiana! Alongside Chinensis and our newfound ally, the kingdom of Freesia, we will see that the United Hanazuo Kingdom's destiny is one of safety!"

It was the eve of the great war. King Lance Silva Lowell of Cercis, one half of the United Hanazuo Kingdom, was addressing his troops to boost their morale. The king, with his gleaming red eyes and golden hair that reached all the way down his back, held up a cup to toast the men. The rest of us stood at his side and drank to his toast. All the knights and soldiers let out roaring cheers, holding up their swords and fists with unwavering determination in their eyes.

I was staying in the United Hanazuo Kingdom, far away from my homeland of Freesia. My mission was to save the kingdom of Chinensis—the other half of

Hanazuo—from the threat of invasion by foreign countries that belonged to the Rajah Empire.

It all began with a visit from Prince Cedric, second-born prince of Cercis, who sought an alliance with Freesia. Cedric's brother, King Lance, ruled over the gold-rich kingdom of Cercis, while King Yohan ruled over the kingdom of Chinensis, a land famous for its minerals. Cedric came to request our help after the Rajah Empire threatened to invade.

We were Freesians. Our kingdom was famous for its impressive power, and it was the only country in the world whose people were born with special abilities. I was Pride Royal Ivy, crown princess of this powerful nation.

I stood there, red hair falling in waves and purple eyes aglimmer, to command the knights that had traveled from Freesia to help this country as reinforcements.

I was also extremely exhausted.

Evidently, I wasn't the only one. Tiara, my younger sister by two years, barely seemed able to keep her eyes open. Stale, my adoptive younger brother by one year, shifted from side to side to keep himself alert.

Earlier, Stale had toured the Cercian and Chinensian castles, being sure to get his eyes on every nook and cranny of the grounds—from the unused southern wing of the Cercian palace to the back walls of the Chinensian palace's combined chapel. He was the firstborn prince of Freesia and possessed the special power of teleportation. The ability did have its limits: he could only teleport to areas he had been to before or to coordinates he knew. His tour must have required plenty of preparation.

Stale could teleport directly to me and a few other people, but this ability only manifested after Stale met the subject numerous times and gained an understanding of their character.

Our meetings with the representatives of Hanazuo, King Lance and King Yohan, went well. We started from zero and mapped out how to distribute and position troops, as well as how to signal the end of the war to the front lines. We went over the details several times just to be sure we had them all down. Seventy percent of the combined forces of our three countries would head to

Chinensis with King Yohan, while the remaining 30 percent would remain behind to serve as reinforcements and defense. We'd also deploy a Freesian communication specialist to each squadron so that all troops could exchange orders and reports.

Cedric, Tiara, and Prime Minister Gilbert would stay in Cercis. King Lance, Stale, Commander Roderick, and I would take 90 percent of our knights and 15 percent of the Cercian soldiers to Chinensis, the focal point of the invasion. From there, they would split into border patrol setups, camps, and strongholds waiting on standby.

Once King Lance finished his speech, one of the guards whispered an urgent message in his ear: "Your Majesty. There's a situation at the gates."

I turned to him, wondering what was going on. Cedric leaned in to listen.

As the second-born prince of Cercis, Cedric bore the same golden hair and fiery eyes as King Lance, his older brother. His shoulder-length hair billowed around him, and flashy golden accessories—such as earrings, necklaces, and golden bangles—adorned his body. An assortment of gold rings gleamed on his fingers; some were set with rubies to match his eyes. He wore two on both his middle fingers.

From head to toe, the young prince—just seventeen, like me—shone like a ray of golden light. His well-shaped nose and long eyelashes complimented his masculine features. That, combined with his wild golden hair, gave him the look of a lion with a flowing mane aflame all around him.

Once the soldier finished his report, King Lance and Cedric both furrowed their brows into a scowl and exchanged glances.

"Let's go," King Lance said.

Just when he was about to rise from his throne, Cedric stopped him. "No. I can handle it alone."

King Lance nodded, and the soldier led Cedric out of the room.

"You must be wondering what's going on here."

Stale startled me by speaking quietly at my side. My black-haired, black-eyed

brother watched me through the black-framed glasses he wore only for show. We both glanced at the door.

“I heard him mention the front gates,” Vice Captain Eric said from behind me. His chestnut-brown hair matched his eyes.

“Maybe they’ve had an unexpected visitor?” Captain Alan suggested. This man, with his short, golden-brown hair and orange eyes, was leader of the First Squadron and Vice Captain Eric’s direct superior. Both of them protected me as my imperial knights.

“Why don’t we go find out for ourselves? I’m curious too,” Stale said.

At a purposeful look from Stale, Vice Captain Eric and Captain Alan nodded and snuck off in the direction Cedric had gone. I didn’t love the idea of leaving Tiara on her own, especially not when she was so tired.

As I fretted over this, I heard Commander Roderick call out to her. I breathed a sigh of relief; she’d be safe with him.

We exited the room to find ourselves in an unoccupied corridor, and Stale teleported us the rest of the way. The image before my eyes changed from the hallway to the front gates of the castle in an instant.

Stale had placed us behind a bit of cover. I had to peer around it to make out what was happening. Before I could get a good look, an old man near the gates kicked up a fuss.

“Just call for Prince Cedric already!” he cried. “Do you want this kingdom to survive or not?! If you won’t go get him, then let me inside! He’s the only one I’ll speak to!”

Thin hair clung to the top of the man’s head. He shouted at the guards blocking his path, who didn’t seem to know what to make of him.

“We can’t allow you to enter without authorization,” they told him again and again. But the red-faced man wasn’t giving up that easily.

“Authorization?! I used to work in this castle! Fifteen years ago, I could stroll through these gates and go anywhere I wanted without permission from the likes of y—”

“That’s all in the past now, isn’t it, Lord Hanmu?”

Cedric’s cold voice cut the old man off mid-sentence. His accessories jingled with each step as he paced over. He stopped about three steps away, at which point the guards readied their spears to protect the prince—a silent warning to the old man not to come any closer.

“Oh my! Prince Cedric, how much you’ve grown!”

The old man smiled at him fondly, reaching out toward the prince with trembling hands. The guards swiftly pushed him away, but he didn’t seem to mind. His creepy, enraptured gaze remained fixed on Cedric.

“What do you want *now*, Lord Hanmu? Why did you ask for me, and what’s this about the survival of Cercis? I’ll hear you out, but we’re not moving from this spot.”

I had never heard Cedric’s voice so frosty and dismissive. The man continued on as if he didn’t even sense it.

“Does that mean you remember me? When you...I mean, when Your Highness was a boy—”

“Of course I remember you. You and former Seneschal Bertrand treated me like your toy, you old fossil.”

Pure, icy hostility emanated from Cedric. We could even feel it from where we hid. A shudder scurried down my spine. Meanwhile, Cedric was burning hot, flames of rage lighting his eyes as he glared at the man.

“Ooh! Incredible as ever, Prince Cedric! So you really do remember me!”

I couldn’t tell if the man was genuinely happy or simply mocking the prince. Despite Cedric’s harsh words, the old man’s eyes sparkled with delight. He stretched out his arms as though reaching for a hug.

“Is that all?” Cedric said. “If you’re done, then leave. Or maybe you want punishment, like what Bertrand got? If that’s the case, then I’ll be happy to help.”

“Now is the time to rise up, Your Highness! We ought to stand not as the United Hanazuo Kingdom, with those heretic Chinensians, but as Cercis and

Cercis alo—”

“Throw this old fool out at once! And you, don’t set foot near the castle ever again!”

Cedric unleashed his anger at the old man. The guards flinched at the prince’s rage, clearly flustered, then rushed forward to grab the old man and drag him away.

“Please, wait! Allow me to speak!” the old man cried, struggling against the guards. Cedric turned his back on him, refusing to spare him another glance, and headed back toward the castle.

“Just a moment, Prince Cedric.”

A new voice broke through the commotion. Stale and I exchanged bewildered looks as we both recognized the speaker. We forgot all about staying hidden, sticking our heads out to get a better look.

Cedric looked just as surprised as we were. “Prime Minister Gilbert...”

It really *was* him. No one could mistake that shoulder-length ponytail of light blue hair and matching fox-like eyes. This was none other than Freesia’s outstanding prime minister. His smile was elegant as he held up his hand toward the guards, halting their attempts to haul away the old man—whom Cedric had called Lord Hanmu.

Gilbert grinned at Cedric and bowed deeply. “May I be allowed to handle this man myself?” he said. “I’m very interested in hearing what he has to say. Could I request, say, an hour of time with him?”

“I don’t think...” Cedric began, but he trailed off, lost for words.

“I have nothing to speak about with you! I’m only here for Prince Cedric!” Lord Hanmu spat.

I understood why Cedric was hesitating. Judging by what he had already said, the old man must have once served high-up in the country’s government, but he didn’t view Chinensis in a positive light. I’d heard rumors about the royalty of both countries holding on to past grudges. After witnessing the close relationship between King Yohan and King Lance, I had assumed that this was

no longer the case—but it seemed some of those grudges were here to stay. Surely Cedric wouldn't want a person like that meeting Freesia's prime minister, since we were both about to go to war for Chinensis's sake tomorrow.

"Rest assured, Prince Cedric," Prime Minister Gilbert said. "All I ask is a room inside the castle for my use. My kingdom recently suffered surprise attacks, threats made against our maids, intruders in the castle, and all sorts of foolish deeds, but I don't sense any such danger coming from this gentleman."

Cedric flinched as Prime Minister Gilbert's smile curled at the corners. When he bent to whisper in Cedric's ear, Cedric recoiled, his face going pale.

"I-If you say so..."

With wide eyes, he ordered his guards to show Prime Minister Gilbert and the old man into the castle to one of the parlor rooms.

After watching Cedric's swift departure, Prime Minister Gilbert smiled a bit too politely, beckoning the old man and the guards into the castle with him.

It took less than an hour for the news of the captured Cercian "informant" to race through the castle.

The elderly man was confirmed to be Lord Hanmu. By the sound of it, he had secret ties to the kingdom of Copelandii—a domain ruled by the Rajah Empire. Apparently, the old man put up such a struggle in Prime Minister Gilbert's care that he injured his arms and passed out. His questioning wasn't over, though. Cercis would get a chance to grill him next about the origins of his ties to Copelandii.

At least Prime Minister Gilbert had extracted the most important information before Lord Hanmu lost consciousness. We only had a few hours left before the war would begin, and we'd need that intelligence. According to the prime minister, the enemy would infiltrate at dawn. That gave us less than half a day to prepare.

The original plan was to have some troops stationed before dawn, but since we now knew the exact time of the attack, we opted to deploy every squadron a bit earlier than scheduled.

Copelandii likely had no interest in beginning this war with formal talks.

Instead, they were sure to invade Chinensis first and demand the latter choose between becoming a province or colony. That was the only reason to launch a sneak attack at dawn, as Lord Hanmu had revealed. Which meant Chinensis was about to become a battlefield.

“Shouldn’t we get going now, Pride?” Stale asked. “His Majesty and Commander Roderick are waiting at the front. Tiara has agreed to stay behind, as promised.”

Stale and I sat atop horses, preparing to depart. He patted Tiara’s head as he spoke, assuring her we’d reach out through a communication specialist as soon as we arrived in Chinensis. I did the same, stroking my adorable little sister’s soft hair, but I didn’t get the chance to speak with her.

“Wait!”

A voice suddenly called out behind me, and I turned to find Cedric jogging our way. He’d finished saying goodbye to King Lance before rushing all the way to the back where we were positioned. By the time he reached us, he was gasping for breath.

“What’s the matter, Cedric?”

Stale, Captain Alan, and Vice Captain Eric all pulled their horses closer to me protectively, keeping their eyes on Cedric. It was clear that they were still on high alert around him, which was only natural considering the trouble he’d caused in Freesia.

Cedric, seeming to realize this, backed away a little before gazing up at me. “Take care of Big Brother...and Bro.” Despite the simple, clumsy words, his voice broke with emotion. He squeezed his fists and furrowed his brow, eyes blazing all over again.

“Of course,” I replied.

That wasn’t enough for Cedric. He pursed his lips and peered down at his shoes. The next time he spoke, his voice emerged quieter. “Tell me...” he began, lifting his head to look at me. “Tell me how I can be as strong as you.”

It was neither flattery nor an attempted compliment. The request had obviously been weighing on his mind. He stared at me with fiery, unblinking

eyes while I floundered for an adequate response.

“I simply do everything in my power to protect the things I care about,” I managed at last. “There’s no secret.”

A crease formed in his brow. He opened his mouth to challenge my response, but I continued before he could.

“The same goes for you. You mustn’t hold back anymore.”

Holding back was how he’d spent the first three days as a guest in our kingdom. At my request, his fiery eyes flared. His mouth fell open even wider.

I gripped the reins tightly with one hand and turned toward Cedric, reaching out to tuck his golden hair behind his ear. His earring jingled from the motion. Cedric shivered, surprised by the sudden touch, so I leaned in to whisper into his ear.

“It’s all right. I know you can protect them.”

I knew he wasn’t mentally prepared for that responsibility just yet. In the game, it took the loss of those he cared about for him to act. But he hadn’t suffered that loss here, so it was entirely possible he’d remain in his current state forever.

Still, I couldn’t allow him to lose Lance and Yohan again.

Even without experiencing tragedy, he was capable of standing up on his own someday—just as Arthur and Leon had. I smiled at him, hoping to convey that wish. He pressed his lips together and scrunched up his face like he was holding back tears.

“I’ll be going now,” I told him. “I’ll contact you once we’ve arrived.”

I sat up straight on my horse. With a final farewell to Cedric and Tiara, I nudged my steed to follow after Stale, Captain Alan, and Vice Captain Eric. As we departed, my little sister cried out, “Be safe!”

We passed through the big gates, which the guards slowly closed behind us. The gates slammed shut with a heavy thud.

“I...I’ll always hate you!” someone shouted then.

I recognized the voice, but the words didn't make sense. Stale and I twisted in our saddles, looking for the source. The knights followed our gazes with half smiles on their faces.

From beyond the palace gates, we couldn't see what lay behind us anymore. But I knew what I'd heard. That voice belonged to...

"Tiara?"

"Hey! Wait up!"

I chased after the small girl while my guards and knights followed behind me. She refused to stop even when I called out to her. The guards around her glanced between us, trying to figure out if they should stop her or not. I signaled for them to step away and they obeyed, allowing her to march forward on her tiny little legs. I knew the girl running from me. Those skinny, pale arms and wavy golden hair could only belong to Tiara Royal Ivy, Pride's little sister.

"Wait, I said! What did I ever do to you?!"

I could hardly remember a time when the two of us spoke. At my question, Tiara halted and stomped her foot.

When Pride and Stale were on their way out, she'd seen them off with a smile and a wave. Yet without looking my way, she'd said under her breath, *"Don't get the wrong idea. I haven't forgiven you for all the things you did to Big Sister."*

For a second, it didn't even sound like Tiara—but that icy voice really had emerged from her soft, rosebud lips.

"Even if she forgives you..."

The moment the gates closed behind Pride's group, Princess Tiara had fixed her golden eyes on me in an open show of hostility.

"I...I'll always hate you!"

Why would she say such a thing to me out of nowhere? Sure, when I visited Freesia, I insulted Pride and made a fool of myself. Prince Stale and the imperial knights were still wary of me despite coming here to fight for my country. But

what had I ever done to this girl?

“Princess Tiara!”

I stopped right behind her. She balled her tiny, trembling hands into fists and whirled to face me. Her lips were pressed into a hard, thin line, and her normally soft eyes blazed with hatred. A furious blush lit her face as she struggled to keep her voice level.

“You’ve done a *lot*, Prince Cedric!”

Her clear, light voice was a punch to the gut. Somehow I was strangely calm as she hollered at me, explaining how I’d offended her.

“Big Sister—no, *Princess Pride* is very, very special to me. She’s also special to Big Brother, the knights, and all the Freesian people! She’s my beloved sister. Everyone else loves her too! But you went and...and...”

The words burst free like she’d been holding them back for some time. She clamped down on the rest of what she wanted to say, but it built up within her until she couldn’t withhold it anymore.

When her small lips parted next, she bellowed, “Dummy! Spoiled brat!”

As soon as the words were out, Princess Tiara slapped her hands over her mouth. Her face burned even more brightly. Without so much as a parting glance, she spun on her heel and fled.

I never realized just how many enemies I had out there. I froze, watching her leave, when it struck me that Princess Tiara was using the same words Pride had once used.

“I hate you!”

This was the second time a girl, or anyone else for that matter, told me they hated me to my face. No one else had ever said anything of the sort, yet I’d heard it twice in just a few days, and from two sisters of the same royal family.

In truth, I was jealous of Pride’s strength. How was she able to do things like that without hesitation? I’d always needed others to protect me, but she commanded overwhelming strength.

“The same goes for you. You mustn’t hold back anymore.”

What did she mean by that? Was she just scolding me for the stupid stunts I pulled the first day we met? Or was it something more?

“Don’t hold back, she says...”

What exactly could I do? When I looked down at my fists, I saw two completely powerless hands. Others had to take those hands and lead me; I never reached out and grabbed anything for myself. Even if I eventually discovered that kind of strength within, there was no time left. Tomorrow I’d face the results of all my years of laziness.

Everything I yearned for lay out of reach now.

“Please! Not that!”

Someone cried out in utter desperation.

“But I... This isn’t!”

I recognized the voices. They were people I knew well...

“Please, Prime Minister Gilbert! Please just...”

“Princess Tiara!”

Tiara was pressing Prime Minister Gilbert for something. The pair was too blurry for me to see clearly, but I could tell that Tiara’s face was twisted with desperation, while Prime Minister Gilbert wore a hesitant expression. Tiara was staring up at the tall man. His fox-like eyes met hers, wavering with uncertainty.

They must be in the castle. At first, Prime Minister Gilbert shook his head, but Tiara held her ground and eventually he nodded.

“Very well... I’ll...for...”

“Thank you so much!”

Prime Minister Gilbert bowed his head deeply as Tiara peered up at him with sparkling eyes. He let out a heavy breath.

“...ide... Pride... Are you all right?”

Stale’s voice roused me back to consciousness. My mind was still fuzzy as I

turned to find him. He was leaning against a wall and watching me with concern.

“Sorry, Stale. I’m fine.” I offered him a smile. “I think I just dozed off for a little.”

“Of course. I’m sure you’re exhausted.” Although he’d told me he took a nap earlier, he still seemed quite sleepy.

What was that dream about? Was it ORL? I don’t know what scene that was supposed to be.

My memories of the first game in the series were hazy, since I hadn’t played it through too many times. Judging by the people I saw in the dream, it had to be the Gilbert route. He was the “secret” character with the least amount of content, and I couldn’t recall the context of that conversation between Gilbert and Tiara no matter how I tried. *Why did that memory come to me now?*

Stale’s armor clinked as he approached. “The sun will be rising soon,” he said.

We were in the western tower of Chinensis. The border between Chinensis and Cercis waited at our backs. This was one of the headquarters Stale, the knights, and I would have to defend. Copelandii, Alata, and Rafflesiana all lay to the north of Chinensis. That was where we believed they would mount their attack from.

King Lance was stationed in the eastern tower, while King Yohan would be in the Chinensian castle to the south, with each king accompanied by his own troops along with Freesian communication specialists. These specialists didn’t send word through normal means—they possessed specific special powers that aided in communication. The method was unique to the individual, but it functioned by broadcasting an image sent from a specific point of view.

Stale had proposed that another squadron of knights join King Yohan and the specialists at the castle, and the knights had been happy to oblige. Whatever happened in that castle, we would be able to see it through their transmissions.

When I tugged my gaze away from the window, moving displays spread out in front of me like televisions in an electronics store from my past life. They were broadcasts coming from Cercis, the front lines to the north, the eastern tower,

and the base inside the Chinensian palace. Our own image was being broadcast to all of their locations as well, thanks to the four transmission specialists we had with us.

There were more camps of knights and soldiers outside of the main bases, but for now the transmission specialists were only broadcasting from these five points. Other specialists were positioned throughout the smaller camps, prepared to contact us in an emergency.

“Right. Everyone seems to be in order,” I said.

I spoke to the image transmissions and received nods of approval from each of them: Tiara, Prime Minister Gilbert, and a slightly separated Cedric in Cercis; King Lance in the eastern tower; King Yohan in his castle; and Commander Roderick and his knights at the northern front.

“Please rest at ease,” Commander Roderick said. *“We won’t allow them to breach the northern perimeter. This is for the United Hanazuo Kingdom and for you, Princess Pride.”*

The commander’s blue eyes blazed with crimson fire even through the transmission, as though it captured his aura and not just his image. Vice Captain Eric and the others around him looked equally determined.

Once we arrived in Chinensis, my imperial knights had spent all night with me instead of changing shifts. Vice Captain Eric and Captain Callum had guarded me before, but Captain Alan took over for them. Captain Callum, who was the same rank as Captain Alan, had reddish-brown hair and eyes of the same color.

Before deploying, Commander Roderick had informed each squadron of the blood oath I’d made to Chinensis. This caused quite a fuss. The commander’s solemn news sent a ripple of anxiety through the troops.

“It means that our defensive mission here will decide the fate of Princess Pride...and our entire kingdom.”

All the knights fell silent at those words; they were the same ones I’d heard yesterday. Even the men who already knew of the blood oath—Arthur, Captain Callum, Captain Alan, Vice Captain Eric, and the members of the Ninth Squadron—stood up a little straighter.

“Defend this land by any means necessary! Your pride as knights depends on it!”

Commander Roderick’s thunderous voice had boomed out like a shock wave. A deafening war cry rose in response, loud enough to rouse the whole kingdom, or at least that was how it felt.

That’s right. We can’t lose.

South of the western and eastern towers, ahead of the castle, lay the capital city of Chinensis. The citizens of both Chinensis and Cercis had already been told to evacuate, but that alone wasn’t enough to ease my worries.

If Copelandii managed to invade the castle to the very south of Chinensis and force King Yohan to surrender, it would all be over. That meant an almost certain occupation of Chinensis, along with their ally Cercis. Due to my blood oath, I would then burn at the stake along with King Yohan. Worse yet, if our defensive campaign failed, the civilian population would be slaughtered or captured as slaves. I swore to myself that we would absolutely not allow that to unfold.

“Elder Sister, may I ask you for something before the battle begins?”

It was still slightly dark outside, but Stale’s intense gaze bore into me when I faced him. Torches illuminated our tower, the red glow shimmering in Stale’s black eyes. I couldn’t bring myself to look away.

“I’m not a knight,” he said. “I might even be the weakest person here right now.”

Captain Callum and Captain Alan both went wide-eyed at that remark, staring at him from behind.

I understood their surprise. Stale was far from weak. He had spent years polishing his swordsmanship skills alongside Arthur. He trained almost every single day until he had to begin his seneschal work. Even under the current circumstances, he found ways to train regularly. No doubt he was a much stronger fighter than even the Stale from the game.

“Still, I’m prepared to swear this to you.”

Pinned beneath his stare, I swallowed as I awaited his next words. The dim world outside gradually lightened. The glow of the rising sun limned Stale in soft light.

“Elder Sister, I will protect you.”

He fell to one knee with a quiet thud. Behind him, Captain Alan and the other knights followed suit. They looked up at me just like Stale was doing.

With each moment, the sun climbed higher and the knights kneeling before me shone brighter. Its rays enveloped me in a gentle hold. Stale alone knelt in my shadow, an array of silver armor gleaming behind him.

“I, and everyone here, will stake our lives on it,” Stale said.

In that moment, he looked like any other member of the knights. He knelt there in his jet-black armor, swearing his oath toward the sun. On the screens behind him, Commander Roderick and the others had taken the same position.

Should I really be their first concern?

This was a battle for Chinensis. For the United Hanazuo Kingdom.

Gratitude and guilt warred within me. That blood oath I’d sworn clearly had an impact on my knights. I clasped my hands at my chest, glanced at one of the other images.

“What?!”

The word slipped out of me unbidden.

It wasn’t just the knights—the broadcast from Cercis showed Tiara, Prime Minister Gilbert, and even Cedric taking a knee. Moreover, King Yohan and his soldiers had done the same!

But why? It was unthinkable that a prince or king from a foreign country would bow to me, even if it was acceptable for my knights to do so. King Lance’s group in the eastern tower watched this all in blatant shock, eyes bulging. Equally flustered, I covered my mouth and watched King Yohan raise his head to give me a gentle smile.

“Yohan! Cedric! Why are you doing this?!” King Lance cried out, appalled.

Royalty were never supposed to kneel to one another, not even among allied countries. Cedric lowered his head at the scolding from his older brother...but he didn't climb back onto his feet.

"Lance, Princess Pride has decided to share in our country's fate. This is something we can do to display our respect for her," King Yohan said.

King Lance, who knew nothing of the blood oath, stiffened in confusion. Prime Minister Gilbert's eyes grew wider as he took in this whole scene. He must have figured it out.

"Princess Pride, as the king of Cercis, it would be wrong for me to bow to you," King Lance said, but his face twisted with guilt.

I agreed completely. As I opened my mouth to tell him so, the king continued his speech.

"However, once we've emerged victorious in this war, I'll be certain to show you the respect you deserve. I owe the kingdom of Freesia more than I could ever express with words."

That sentiment was more than enough for me. I nodded and thanked him, then turned back to Stale on the floor in front of me. He'd knelt in resolute silence the whole time I spoke with the king. But this whole situation had come about due to his hard work.



“Thank you, Stale,” I said quietly enough that only he could hear.

He raised his head and offered a compassionate, genuine smile. Stale was there for me. I had people to support me. There was no reason to hesitate now.

“King Lance! King Yohan!”

Once I’d addressed both royals, I held my hand out to Stale. He gripped it tightly and rose to his feet.

“I am with you,” I said. “We are now one with the United Hanazuo Kingdom!”

Captain Alan and the others followed Stale and stood, as did Commander Roderick and the rest of the knights.

The sun had nearly crested the horizon. The fateful day was upon us. A bell clanged dolefully, marking the start of the war.

I squinted in the harsh morning light and turned around. The blazing star shone on the ground below, where there were no enemies to be found. When I faced the broadcasts again, King Lance and King Yohan had drawn their swords and raised them up. I freed my own blade from its sheath and joined them in pointing toward the window.

The three of us, without any signal, cried out in perfect unison: “For the United Hanazuo Kingdom! May we be victorious!”

We had to win for our beloved homeland, our dear ally, and our own people. The crimson glow of the rising sun glinted in the eyes all around me. We would follow that blazing light of victory. I took in a deep breath, puffing out my chest, and everyone joined in on letting out a piercing war cry.

An explosion happened at that same moment, the shock wave washing over us.

“Aaahhh!”

The ground shook beneath my feet. It was like trying to stand in a violent earthquake.

“Elder Sister!” Stale lunged to wrap his arms around me and hold me steady. Captain Callum and Captain Alan immediately swung into position on either side

of us.

“Get down!” Captain Callum shouted. Captain Alan folded his body over both of our heads.

“Was that an enemy attack?!”

“Where did it come from?! What did it hit?!”

“Give us a status report!”

Shouts of confusion mingled with barked orders from the broadcasted images. Past Captain Alan, I could just make out the cloud obscuring our previously sunny day. Smoke billowed up into the sky and choked the air out of the room. More impacts cracked out while people shouted with increasing panic over the broadcasts. The clamor was loud enough to drown out the explosions themselves.

“Urgent! We’re now being hit with bombs!”

“Urgent! The front lines to the north have been hit! The barrage is still going!”

The explosions were all coming from the front lines to the north—where Commander Roderick was stationed. My heart hammered in my chest as I searched for that broadcast, but the explosion had completely clouded the image. Although I heard the knights’ yells, I couldn’t see a thing.

“The explosions have stopped! Their origin is still unclear! The front lines are still too smoky for a status report!”

“Please, be careful out there! The enemies may use the cover of the smoke to make their next move!” Prime Minister Gilbert replied.

As though on cue, angry cries rose up along with another great rumble—the sound of enemy soldiers charging in to attack my troops. A chill raced down my spine.

“Hurry, send backup!” King Lance cried, but King Yohan instantly rejected the idea.

“No! You can’t act before you know what’s happening, or you might fall into their trap!”

I agreed with King Yohan. It was unlikely that there was only one squadron of enemy troops making their way to—

“Eeeek!”

The scream wasn’t me this time. It was Tiara!

I shoved my head out from underneath Captain Alan’s body. He withdrew from his protective position, allowing me to pass since the explosions near us had ceased.

“Tiara! What’s wrong?!”

“I’m all right! There was a shock wave here! I think there was an explosion at the front gates!” Tiara said, and Prime Minister Gilbert seemed to agree.

“The castle gates?!” Stale said hoarsely. “Why there?! Aren’t they supposed to be after Chinensis, not Cercis?!”

More explosions from Tiara’s transmission answered his query. Everyone on their end of the broadcast trembled.

A soldier suddenly appeared on the display. *“Urgent! Enemy forces are converging on us here in Cercis! They appear to be from the kingdom of Alata!”*

“What the hell?!” Cedric growled. He followed the soldier out of the line of sight of the image.

The kingdom of Alata had even less territory than Chinensis, but right now, most of the Cercian army was stationed *in* Chinensis. The few knights and soldiers left behind would be hard-pressed to hold off the Alatian army on their own.

“We’re the closest to Cercis! We have to go back to help them!” I said.

“We can’t!” Stale responded, quick to step in and stop me. “Acting now would be a mistake. The Chinensian forces could get overwhelmed while we’re gone!”

“Has anyone discerned the source of the bombings?!” Captain Alan demanded, voice dripping with rage.

He raced to the tower window and stuck his head out, looking up at the sky, but he couldn’t find any answers. Several voices responded through the

broadcasts that they likewise hadn't yet pinpointed the source of the assault.

"Bombs don't just fall from the clear blue sky on their own!" Captain Alan snapped.

"This isn't the first time it's happened," Captain Callum said. "There was that battle from two years ago." His cohort growled with frustration, but Captain Callum was already deep in thought. "These bombs are on a completely different level, though..."

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. He was right; we were dealing with something we couldn't even comprehend here.

The Cercian prime minister and an unusually fast-talking Prime Minister Gilbert doled out orders over the transmissions.

"It wasn't as thorough as Chinensis's evacuation, but Cercis also ordered its people to evacuate," the Cercian prime minister said. "The enemy is advancing on the town, but we'll try to hold steady here at the castle for as long as we can! Right now, the northern front needs to be our—"

"This is the northern front! We're requesting backup!"

It wasn't Commander Roderick breaking through the commotion of explosions and screams to call for aid—a different knight was trying to reach us now. The plea came from the northern front, which had only been a feed of screams and impacts until this moment. King Lance, King Yohan, Prime Minister Gilbert, and I all tried to respond, urging the soldier to continue.

"An unidentified object in the air is currently bombing the order!" the soldier said. "Troops are also advancing on us from the ground! They appear to be the armies of Copelandii and Rafflesiana!"

"What damage have you sustained?! How many knights have fallen?!" Prime Minister Gilbert asked.

I was grateful to have his clear head on our side, asking for the crucial information we needed even in the midst of chaos. The explosions were strong enough to reach us all the way out here; we had to understand the state of things and what we were up against before we could act.

“We have no casualties,” the soldier said. “Two are seriously injured. More have minor wounds but are still able to fight. We’ve lost our weapons store, though. We’re currently battling the enemy while our special power medics treat the worst of the wounded.”

Thank goodness. Hearing that no one had died was the best possible news given the dire situation.

On the contrary, King Lance and King Yohan were floored by the report.

“Only two?!”

“No casualties?!”

I understood how they felt. To be blunt, if anyone other than our Freesian knights had been hit with those blasts, the death toll would probably be in the two or three digits.

“Commander Roderick, do you need backup?” I asked, the relief still washing over me.

“We’re all right!” he responded just as an enemy soldier screamed.

“We can hold them back on our own for now.” The reporting knight spoke up, elaborating on Commander Roderick’s answer. *“But once things are stable in your position, we do need spare weapons! If the explosions start up again, we might be in trouble...”*

Prime Minister Gilbert jumped in. *“Is that really all you’re requesting, Commander Roderick?! After so many explosions, the terrain has to be—”*

“It’s fine! Focus on the others, not us!” Commander Roderick shouted over Prime Minister Gilbert. His voice came across clear and concise even with the distance.

Prime Minister Gilbert narrowed his eyes with a scowl, but shook that off a moment later and went on giving orders. *“Then send backup to Cercis. The town is sitting in harm’s way. We request transportation specialists from the nearest western tower. Send more men from the eastern tower to make up for the departing troops.”*

At that, I ordered the nearby knights to send 20 percent of the men at the

western tower back to Cercis. King Lance also sent 30 percent of his own soldiers to the western tower as well.

“I’ll send them there myself,” Stale said. “Have all the knights returning to Cercis follow me.” He followed up with a meaningful look at Prime Minister Gilbert, who nodded in understanding.

“Much appreciated.”

“Elder Sister, I’ll only be away for two minutes,” Stale told me. “Whatever you do, don’t step away from your imperial knights!”

Stale then rushed off to a place where the other camps wouldn’t be able to see him through the transmissions. He was going to use his teleportation power to send knights to Cercis as reinforcements. Surely Cercis could weather the attacks.

Rooooooar!

A fresh explosion boomed nearby. Everyone plugged their ears, and we swiveled toward the source of the sound. The people on the other ends of the transmissions shouted in turn:

“They’re back!”

“Look to the sky!”

“What is that?!”

The knights around us stuck their heads out of the windows and pointed upward. “You can see where the bombs are coming from!” one of them reported. Captain Alan, Captain Callum, and I all rushed to get a look for ourselves. Our mouths fell open when we glimpsed what lay outside the tower.

Blimps. Large enough for two or three people each, and all carrying ominous objects below them. Those had to be the bombs.

The blimps flew high enough in the sky to avoid the blowback from their own weapons. Some flew in from the north, so numerous I couldn’t even count them. The other ones must have come while we were still reeling from the first blast. These must have been the cause of the explosions and smoke still clouding the transmission from the north. And now one of those blimps was

heading toward the top of our tower.

King Yohan, King Lance, and Cedric cried out from their transmissions.

“So many!”

“This is bad!”

“You have to get out of there!”

The communication specialist barked an update: “The Fifth and Sixth Squadrons request permission to retreat!”

At that, I murmured, “Thank goodness.” At least we could see the enemy this time around.

Two figures pounded up the tower’s spiral staircase and burst into the room.

“I’ve returned, Elder Sister!” Stale said.

“Are you all right, Your Highness?!” Arthur asked.

I turned to greet them, reassured by their presence. Arthur must have rushed to our camp the moment he heard the explosions. As a member of the Eighth Squadron, he was free to detach from the unit and act on his own.

“I’ve sent off all the reinforcements!” Stale told me. “What’s happening here now?!”

“Lots of blimps are flying in from the north,” I said. “They’re all capable of dropping bombs! I can’t tell for sure from here, but one looks like it’s flying over our western tower!”

“The Fifth and Sixth Squadrons are on standby!” Captain Callum added.

Arthur and Stale joined us at the window to get a look at the situation in the sky.

“The problem is how they’re managing to detonate those bombs,” Stale said, glaring at the blimp above us.

The rest of us nodded in agreement. If the bombs detonated easily on impact, shooting the blimp down could still result in widespread destruction.

Arthur set one foot on the stone window frame. “Then we need to bring that

blimp down somehow.”

I tilted my head to one side, trying to get a read on him. It seemed like he was working out a plan, but the blimp was still far beyond our reach. Stale couldn't get a good enough look at the passenger pod to teleport anyone there. He furrowed his brow at Arthur, probably as curious about what the knight could be thinking as I was.

Arthur calmly turned to face the rest of the knights. “Excuse me! Where are the weapon reserves?”

One of the men gave him the location, then tossed him a spare sword to use. Arthur thanked him, gripping the new sword in one hand and his own sword in the other. Captain Callum and a few other knights asked if he needed help making it there.

“No, I can get it done by myself. Please stand back, Princess Pride. This will be dangerous,” said Arthur, unsheathing the spare sword.

I took a few steps backward as requested. Arthur stuck the entire upper half of his body out of the window. He immediately flung a blade skyward with shocking power.

Fwoosh! The sound tore through the air, booming in our ears. I crouched to watch, but the sword was already long gone, leaving nothing but a breeze in its wake. For a moment, I thought it must have missed, but then Captain Alan clapped Arthur on the back and cheered, “Hell yeah! That’s our Arthur!” He must have grazed the side of the blimp with pinpoint precision, in true Arthur fashion.

“I thought it might crash if the hole was too big,” Arthur said. “Should I try it again?”

Captain Callum quickly made to stop Arthur, who wasn't yet satisfied with the results of his absurd throw. The captain pointed up at the deflating blimp steadily sinking to the ground. Soon it was low enough for us to get a good look. The knights at the tower dashed up the walls to reach it.

“Great job, Arthur!” the knights said as they passed. These were troops with wall-running and gravity-negating special powers who'd been waiting at the

base of the tower. They ran up the walls as though they were perfectly flat ground. Stale and I watched out the window as the knights leapt up to the blimp. It had descended gently enough that no bombs would go off thanks to the impact.

“Argh!”

“What?! How did they—?!”

A few surprised shouts were cut off by the clang of swords clashing. It appeared we’d subdued the enemy. Our knights took control of the blimp, lowering it to the ground at a steady pace.

“Urgent report! The attackers originated from the kingdom of Copelandii!”

“Each blimp has about six bombs on it! The fuses are lit before they drop!”

“We can neutralize them by taking out the pilots, the strings holding the bombs, or the fuses themselves!”

Having finished surveying the blimp, the knights gave their reports. The communication specialists passed along this vital information to the rest of our troops, and I followed up with my own orders.

“Fifth Squadron! Sixth Squadron! Freesian royal order!” I cried. “Eliminate any and all blimps! Once you’ve done so, we’ll march from the eastern and western towers. If you find yourself without a task, then go to Cercis as backup, secure weapons for the front lines, or tend to the wounded.”

Now that we knew what the bombs looked like and how they worked, they were ours for the taking.

The Fifth and Sixth Squadrons consisted of knights who specialized in shooting, be it through sheer skill with a firearm or with special powers. Depending on the power, their shots were essentially guaranteed to land. This rendered the task of taking out individual pilots—and the blimps themselves—child’s play.

Each transmission issued a swift response. Even the men at the front lines of this gruesome battle let out raucous cheers.

“Let’s shoot down whatever blimps we can from the western tower too!”

Stale shouted. “Don’t let them reach Cercis!”

The knights responded affirmatively, and the captains barked out orders. After a short wait, the knights fired up at the distant blimps in the sky. Some jumped up at an angle to reach the blimps, while others aimed directly upward. It wasn’t just the Fifth and Sixth Squadrons either. Any of my kingdom’s brilliant knights could take on the swarm.

The once fearsome brigade of blimps looked as harmless as party balloons.

“That’s their commander! Take him out first!”

At the front lines of the defensive battle to the north, among the screams of fury from the Freesian knights, came a storm of enemy troops dashing from the center of an explosion.

The initial barrage had carved out a large area where the knights I commanded had set up our headquarters. Those headquarters were now little more than a crater in the earth. Fissures sprawled from the center of that crater like spiderwebs. Once, that spot had stored our spare weaponry, meaning we were starting this battle with a dwindling stash of supplies.

Fortunately, my men had avoided major injuries as a result of the explosions. Troops with special powers had erected protective walls the moment the bombs started falling. Others had simply leapt away or moved their squadmates out of the blast radius. Still others weakened the impact of the bombs or threw up shields.

My men on the front lines had been given these shields—crafted by the vanguard units with special powers—for a variety of uses. They could absorb the force of any attack, including bombs, which was most of the reason none of my men had been injured. Though useful, the shields were hardly plentiful.

The blast had also turned the ground around us into treacherous terrain, riddled with cracks and crevices. A single collapse could cause even worse injuries than those sustained from the actual bombs. Two knights ended up severely wounded after falling at unfortunate angles. Others suffered injuries when enemies charged the pits they’d fallen into before they could climb back

up.

Despite being commander of the entire order, I myself had been wounded. I managed to shout orders to Pride and the others from the bottom of the crater, but I knew I wasn't visible on the broadcast itself. I urged my communication specialist not to convey my predicament; Pride would certainly come running herself to help me if she heard. I couldn't allow the northern front to monopolize any more fighting power.

Knights were trying to reel us out of the crater using ropes and special powers, but it was slow going. Moreover, enemy troops kept pouring in to cut us down. Others stood at the top, firing guns and arrows at us. The incessant attacks complicated our attempts at escape.

Then a bomb dropped behind us, sending a few of our rescuers flying into other craters. A third of my knights had to battle within the craters, and the mounting number of wounded was making it harder and harder to escape.

Some men tried to jump down and provide backup, but I ordered them to stop. Those on the high ground had the advantage in this battle. We couldn't lose that and put more knights in harm's way. That being the case, the hostile forces of three countries combined already put my men at a distinct disadvantage in terms of sheer numbers.

We focused on getting the most gravely injured out of the craters first. The ones with special powers freed them from the pits or provided the medical treatment they desperately needed. But as leader of the order, I couldn't escape and leave my men behind.

This kinda reminds me of six years ago.

As I fended off the enemy onslaught, I couldn't help thinking of one particular incident six years ago. Back then, the ambushers had been at the top of a cliff, shooting down at our knights below—myself included.

"This is different," I muttered, though I wasn't entirely convinced.

The enemy soldiers clustered in a group and charged me. I raised my sword, barking out orders as I parried blows and cut them down. Knights rushed to my side to repel the enemy along with me.

“This time, my soldiers can fight.”

It was like watching dominoes fall. We cut through the soldiers in the front, then continued forward in a wave. Our small force neutralized over a dozen enemy soldiers.

“Fire! Send backup! Aim for the knights in front!” an enemy screamed above us.

I looked up and found a row of soldiers approaching the edge of the crater and turning their guns toward the knights below. They loaded their weapons, and their leader raised his hand.

Bang bang bang!

Shots cracked out from our side of the battle. The enemy commander’s eyes went wide in shock as blood burst from his head. He collapsed to the ground, as did the rest of his troops.

“If you know how to shoot, then you’re on gun duty now!” Eric yelled from the top of the crater. “Everyone else, hand over your guns! Don’t let them fire a single shot at your fellow knights or our commander. Take them out before they can shoot!”

Knights grouped up with their leaders, brandishing still-smoking rifles. Eric was the one who’d taken out the enemy commander, displaying his skill with firearms. He was also the first to shoot down a blimp the moment it drifted into view.

It had only been six years since Eric entered the order as a new recruit. Bearing witness to his growth brought me a swell of pride.

“And this time, I have the finest men at my side.”

Our foes spilled over the cliffs and into the craters. They crowded the pits, some even charging in atop horses.

I surveyed the situation with my sword at the ready. When the time was right, I surged toward the enemy and met them with my knights backing me up.

“But most of all...”

I was still reliving that day six years ago, talking to myself the whole time. I

charged at the enemy horseman. The horse raised its front legs to trample me, but I buried my sword in its body. I kicked the collapsing creature away and delivered a killing blow. As the horse succumbed, it crushed the rider beneath itself.

Two more cavalrymen came my way. As I weighed how to engage them, a new threat rushed up behind me, bringing his sword down toward my head.

Clang! I swept my blade up to meet the enemy's, and he hurtled back to the ground. Then I made a beeline for one of my fallen soldiers.

"These guys don't know what they're doin'!"

An additional pair of cavalrymen tried to surround me and charge headfirst in a suicide attack. They brandished their swords to chop at my neck—but I held fast. When they swung their blades...

Crack!

Both blades flew through the air, causing them to stiffen. The force of the impact flung one of the enemy soldiers off his horse. He managed to retrieve his sword and came for me again.

Clang!

It was fruitless. The sword grazed me, but my very skin repelled it, like I was made out of iron. I punched the stunned enemy, knocking him unconscious, and the other man slashed at my neck.

Shiing!

A harsh metallic screech greeted his blow. Our adversaries didn't realize they couldn't harm me this way. My special power granted me invulnerability to slashes, which had earned me the nickname "The Unmarred Knight."

I didn't waste time cutting down the bewildered soldier. Instead I ran, grabbing a free horse's reins and swinging up into the saddle. At first, the animal resisted its new rider, but it soon calmed beneath my practiced hand and obeyed my commands. I spurred it onward into a gallop.

"This time, I can move!"

I charged headlong into the enemy forces. None of them were a match for the

calculated swordsmanship of the strongest Freesian commander.

Cercis was never supposed to be a target for invasion. Chinensis had been the original mark, with Cercis merely serving as reinforcements.

Many Cercian citizens had stayed in town instead of fleeing, hiding in evacuation shelters. Soldiers patrolled the port, waiting with trading vessels. If the battle reached the town, civilians could evacuate to the ships to spare as many lives as possible. These ports, which Chinensis lacked, afforded Cercis's people a swift means of escape.

An enormous ship approached the Cercian border. It was only a single vessel, but it was probably larger than any ship the Cercians had ever seen. The galleon rose up like a sailing fortress on the water. It bore small cannons on each side and a larger one right in the front, making our intent absolutely clear.

The Cercians boarding their vessels regarded our ship with fear, some peering through the windows to get a better look. Even the soldiers at the port gripped their small firearms hesitantly, unsure if it was worth firing.

They should have known that Copelandii, Alata, and Rafflesiana had no need for such a massive ship. But I knew the soldiers stationed here feared this ship was arriving from the Rajah Empire.

"I guess we showed up a bit late," I said. "I just hope Pride is safe."

I stood on the deck, wearing armor over a blue uniform that fluttered in the wind. Despite my intention to join the battlefield, I spoke softly. I couldn't stop thinking about what lay before me: the danger threatening Cercis and Chinensis—and Pride.

"No... Knowing you, you're perfectly safe," I said to myself, as casually as though I were arranging for a cup of afternoon tea. "I'll get to see you soon."

I smiled. The ocean breeze ruffled my indigo hair. Salt stung my jade-green eyes, which were no doubt filled with emotion.

I was the firstborn prince of Anemone, Leon Adonis Coronaria.

"I hope you like my present."

The largest trading country in the world had just joined the battle.

“Anemone? Leon? How is that possible?!”

I couldn’t contain my shock at the unexpected report. Leon, firstborn prince of Anemone, had just sailed into a Cercian port. Prime Minister Gilbert was filling us in on the pressing news from his post in Cercis—he’d been told as much by the soldiers guarding the area.

“I don’t understand either,” he said. “But I don’t believe the soldiers would be mistaken. Did Prince Leon ever mention this, Your Highness?”

I would have stopped him if he’d told me about it, I thought. Anemone’s military power is only a bit stronger than Hanazuo’s in the first place! How could they even think of making an enemy of someone like Rajah?!

“Stale!”

No longer able to hold back, I turned to Stale at my side. He understood without me saying another word. *It’ll be faster to teleport to Leon directly and ask him myself!*

“Arthur,” I said, “we’ll be away for a while, so please defend this area with the rest of the knights!”

Captain Alan and Captain Callum had to come with me as my imperial knights. I took their hands and granted Arthur temporary command of the area. Then the four of us disappeared in a blink.

“Leon!”

As soon as the scene changed, I’d found an armor-clad Leon standing right in front of me. He turned at my cry, beaming brightly. “Pride!”

“Why did you come here?! Anemone was just supposed to provide support!”

His kingdom was never meant to get mixed up in the war effort. They’d already provided weapons, as planned; the Freesian castle was well stocked thanks to their help. That should’ve been the end of their participation.

I leapt toward Leon and grabbed the blue fabric of his uniform. His sweet smile betrayed no hint of surprise. “Yes, I know. That’s why I brought you all these weapons.”

He gestured through a heavy-looking open door to the armory. A plethora of weapons filled every single corner of the room. It seemed like an even bigger storehouse than the one at our knights’ headquarters. Brand-new, flawless weaponry gleamed even in the shadows of the storeroom. Captain Alan let slip an awed “Whoa!” behind me. Even Captain Callum blinked his reddish-brown eyes more rapidly than usual.

“I didn’t think we’d sent Freesia enough, so I brought along all these presents,” Leon said.

Presents was an interesting word for the deadly weapons arrayed before me, but Leon was right that the initial provisions he’d provided seemed like nothing compared to all this. With these, our army could fight for two days straight without any trouble. In all honesty, after what had happened to the front lines in the north, this unexpected gift was a huge boon. We’d also been told that Cercis and Chinensis—two peaceful nations—had few weapons to start with. The entire situation was different now because of this delivery. *But still!*

“You can’t do this!” I said. “If you join us now and the unthinkable happens, Anemone could fall into the hands of Rajah and—”

“Our promise.”

Leon spoke quietly and suddenly over me. He reached out his long pinky toward me, giving me his best puppy-dog eyes.

I squeezed my lips together and fell silent. Stale furrowed his brow in suspicion at the whole scene, but Leon was right. We *had* made a promise back when Cedric was visiting the castle and Leon had shown up out of concern for me.

“Pride... If this happens again, will you please reach out to me for help?”

He wanted me to rely on him. I just never imagined the offer extended to a battlefield!

Much as I wanted to refuse him, Leon’s gaze weighed heavily on me. He

wiggled his pinky finger to remind me of the promise we'd made. Soldiers' shouts and the roar of falling bombs in Cercis—and, even more loudly, in Chinensis—offered a dramatic background to our staredown. Commander Roderick and Prime Minister Gilbert had all but begged for extra weapons through the transmission earlier.

"F-fine... Thank you, Leon. We'll accept the supply of weapons."

My shoulders shook as I forced myself to accept Anemone's offer. Leon lit up and waved Stale toward the weapons storeroom. He must have been expecting us to show up together.

"Prince Stale, please return and take more whenever you find yourself in need."

Leon was one of the few people who knew about Stale's power. Judging by Leon's behavior and his unperturbed smile, he'd been planning to make use of Stale's special power all along.

"Thank you," Stale replied. "There's no time to argue, so I'll send these ahead right away." He asked Captain Alan and Captain Callum to pick the weapons that would be most useful to the knights. Captain Alan threw in a few unusual requests for weapons that were new to us all, but Captain Callum kept him focused on the task at hand.

In the meantime, I updated Leon on the state of the war, summarizing it as best I could in the time we had. When I told him how much this delivery actually helped us, Leon sighed with genuine relief.

"I'm glad I could help. Now I can leave the enemy soldiers who are already here to the local troops and Freesian knights. I'll work on preventing any more Alatian forces from setting foot in Cercis."

"Huh?!" Every muscle in my face tightened at once. Leon tapped his chin with a finger. "Um, Leon... You've made the delivery already. I don't want you and your men getting roped in any further."

"No, we'll be fighting too. That's why we came here. Father already gave his permission."

Leon signaled to his knights. In response, they cried, "All troops to the second

armory!”

There’s a second armory?!

“I’m the one who sailed all the way here from Anemone,” Leon told me. “As its prince, I think it’s only fair that you allow this.”

You did?! I couldn’t believe my ears. When I tentatively asked him if he was serious, his response was an immediate *yes*. Leon had managed to navigate the most efficient, five-day route between Anemone and Cercis. Inexperienced sailors couldn’t even dream of making that trip! I knew that he was in the habit of visiting ships and participating in trade, but I had no idea he’d been studying sailing as well.

“But, Leon, I don’t want your entire country roped into this war because of me!”

Leon loved his homeland more than anything. I found it difficult to imagine he would put his beloved people in danger for my sake. I gazed up at him, and he offered me a charming smile.

“Don’t talk about yourself like that, Pride. Besides, it’s not merely for your sake.”

He squeezed my right shoulder, complimenting how I looked in the scarlet uniform and armor, then slid his hand down my arm to lift my hand.

“I want Anemone to become a land its people can be proud of. It’s about more than being protected. We should protect others too. I want us to rush to the aid of an ally, a sworn friend, when they’re in crisis.”

He concluded this speech by kissing the back of my hand. My face flushed with heat. This was far too reminiscent of the tender kiss he gave me a year ago.

“Also…” Leon lifted his gaze from my hand. “Anemone is strong under my rule.” The light in his jade-green eyes glinted like the edge of a knife.

That look, and Leon’s generally sensual bearing, sent warmth creeping through my body. My heart pounded at the intensity of his charm and allure. I’d never felt it at this level before. It was frightening, exciting, and impressive all at

once—nearly impossible to resist. I forgot all about the fact that we were standing on a battlefield. My mouth fell open in bewilderment. *This is bad. Leon's charm is too strong!*

Leon smiled at my flustered state. He lowered my hand and casually turned to watch over his knights as they prepared for battle, as though nothing had happened between us.

“Prince Stale, could I request one of your communication specialists to join up with our party? I think it would be helpful to be able to transmit our status to the rest of you as well.”

“Understood!” Stale responded while teleporting the many weapons away. I was busy ordering my body—still under Leon’s spell—to start functioning again.

Leon instructed his knights to anchor the ship a little ways away from the port once everyone disembarked. It would make it harder for the enemy to capture the vessel. The knights nodded, then left the ship along with horse-drawn carts of luggage.

“Oh, and Pride?” Leon said, stopping before he disembarked. He set his hand on my shoulder, smiled sweetly, and brought his lips close to my ear. “You’re an incredible person. I promise that.”

His hot breath tickled my skin. The warmth that had been receding from my face reignited at his words. By the time I managed to lift my head, Leon was already running off to join the rest of the knights. He waved at me, offering a final glimpse of that perpetually charming smile.

It had been a long time since I suffered such a direct hit from ORL’s prince of sensuality. Leon left me standing there with my face burning as he mounted his horse and took off into Cercis with his knights.

He was the true picture of a knight in shining armor.

“What’s happening, Commander Roderick?!”

My subordinates hurled questions across the battlefield, but I was too preoccupied with cutting down enemies to respond. The situation unfolding in

front of my eyes was beyond bizarre. I could only mutter under my breath, “What the hell’s going on?”

It wasn’t that we were struggling; my knights slayed foe after foe in quick succession. A few even stole horses to launch counterattacks, as I had. We were holding the line well, so there was no reason to report anything to Princess Pride.

The problem was that the enemy just kept sending more soldiers. And though they wore armor and carried swords, they lacked vigor in a way I just couldn’t put my finger on. The fierce fighting spirit from their initial assault seemed to have drained right out of them. All that remained was the dull desire to kill us.

I fought back, worried that they might have something up their sleeve, but I easily dispatched them with a single strike. Though I thought we might have taken out all of their best soldiers already, the gap in their skill told me something else was going on.

Brow furrowed, I waded through the oncoming enemies. It dawned on me then that these men weren’t just weak—they were barely holding their swords properly. The first wave of soldiers had been nothing compared to us Freesian knights, but at least they were trained for combat. These men barely even knew how to handle a weapon. It was as if they were handing out swords to random civilians and dragging them to the battlefield.

“Don’t tell me...”

I gulped. I continued to hack at the enemies, but the doubts gradually took root in my mind. Sucking in a deep breath, I turned to my subordinates.

“All knights! Take your shields and fall back! Immediately!”

I yelled as loudly as I could, urging my knights to heed me. The men knew to obey an order from their commander first and ask questions later. Those with shields created with special powers picked them up and began to retreat.

“The enemies here aren’t soldiers!”

I hurried my own horse away from the scene. The enemies chased after us, clearly desperate to draw blood. They probably knew what was coming for them; they had their own orders.

“These people... They’re slaves meant to be sacrificed!”

As I shouted, some sixth sense tickled at the back of my mind. I looked up just in time to spot a shower of bombs pouring down from above.

There was absolutely no sign of where they’d come from.

The world went white. An avalanche of power and heat exploded over me and my knights.

My ears rang long after the blasts and shock waves subsided.

I couldn’t hear anything but the ringing in my head. I focused on breathing, gulping down lungfuls of air.

Just like the first time, this barrage came from a source we couldn’t identify. I had managed to protect myself with a shield, but then more bombs landed all around us. Even with our shields, I knew that not all of my knights would manage to protect themselves from the blasts.

Once my ears stopped ringing, I crawled out from behind the shield and stepped into the smoke wafting across the battlefield. When I asked if the rest of my knights were safe, I got responses from all of them, although some sounded more like groans of pain. We’d definitely sustained some injuries.

“The enemy is falling back! If you can get out of the craters, do it now!” I rasped through a dry throat.

Not a single enemy soldier who’d been sent as a sacrifice was still moving. We could retreat without any more concern of being shot at from above. But the blast had sent knights flying in all directions. I could move, but some of my men were seriously hurt. If we sustained another bombing out of the blue, we’d probably lose a handful.

Anyone who could stand either rushed back to camp or helped injured knights get out of harm’s way. Knights who managed to scale the craters lowered ropes for men with special powers who could aid in transporting the wounded to safety. This took time, but it was faster than making them climb out of the craters on their own.

The rescue progressed relatively smoothly. The wounded men were

evacuated by rope or helped up if they struggled to move. I carried two men with injured legs and let another brace against my shoulder so he could walk.

“Commander, behind you!”

Eric’s shout arrived an instant before a surge of tremendous bloodlust washed over me. I spun to find well-armed soldiers pouring into the crater from the enemy’s main camp. This had to be the real enemy army at its full power. Their weapons and the way they carried themselves were totally unlike what we’d seen earlier.

I nearly told the whole order to rush down into the craters, but I quickly realized that would be a misstep. We were outnumbered. Losing our advantageous position at the top of the cliffs would be devastating.

I tossed my shield aside and raced toward our base, carrying the two injured men under my arms.

“Climb up already!” I shouted as I ran. “The enemy’s approaching!”

My men swiftly took aim at the attackers from the top of the cliffs, but we were so few compared to them. The enemy soldiers also appeared to be wearing finer armor—the bullets simply ricocheted off rather than harming them. They let out a triumphant roar, charging even faster toward our injured knights.

“Commander, leave us and go!”

“You must make it out alive!”

The two knights in my arms begged me to abandon them, but I could never leave a man behind. Besides, I probably had as little chance as they did of evading this pursuit.

Apparently, the other knights likewise saw the futility of trying to escape; they ceased their retreat and rushed over to join me. They stood in front to protect me and the wounded men I carried, holding up their swords to greet the advancing forces. The men on top of the cliffs continued to provide covering fire, but the huge mass of foes didn’t even stumble in the face of their fallen comrades. Those of us who’d failed to evacuate were suffering from injuries of some sort. I was probably the only unharmed knight left in the crater. Which

meant I had to be the one to step up.

I set the two men down to rest alongside the other gravely injured. They croaked out pleas for me to run, but I didn't look back. I gave our knights on the defensive line a reassuring pat on the shoulders and strode out in front of the entire group.

"We'll stop them here, so save yourself, Commander!" one protested.

"No. I can't leave my men behind when there's not a scratch on me."

Gripping my sword, I faced the swarm of enemies only a few meters away. I ordered the rear guard and backup to use their guns and special powers if they could still put up a fight.

"If this is where I die, I'd rather die knowing I fought to protect my men instead of abandoning them to save myself," I said. "That's what it means to be a knight."

At those words, my men ceased their pleas for me to flee to safety. They stood resolutely beside me, swords in hand.

The enemy advanced. They let out hoots and hollers, rushing onward in a murderous wave like some snarling beast thundering in to devour us. Their voices reverberated through our armor. The ground shook beneath my feet from the force of their stampede, but I lowered myself into a strong stance and prepared to meet the mass of dripping fangs and snapping jaws.

One enemy raised his sword aloft. Before he could bring it down, I slashed at him from the side, defeating him swiftly. A man behind him immediately leapt in for a follow-up attack. I blocked it with the special power of my left hand, leaving him for another knight to finish off.

A man on horseback made to mow us down, but I sliced through his throat before he could trample us. Just then, a metallic noise rang out among the screams of the enemies: countless rifles had been hoisted up and pointed in our direction. Those of us who could move would be able to dodge, but they weren't aiming at us—they aimed toward the back, where my most gravely injured men sprawled out helplessly.

One knight flew backward to protect them with a shield. Still, it wasn't large

enough to cover all of the vulnerable men. Others tried to rush over with their own shields, but it was too late. I had already thrown my shield away to carry my men, so I could do little but charge ahead to throw the enemy off. Several triggers clicked all at once, ready to dish out death.

“Gimme a break!”

A silver beam of light shot through the air. It streaked down from the cliffs and rained upon the enemy riflemen, tearing them to pieces. One, two, then three—it eliminated enemy after enemy before they could even fire back.

My knights were just as bewildered as our enemies. Everyone looked around for the source of the attack. I soon spotted a white uniform—definitely one of my knights. When the interloper turned, his silver ponytail swishing from side to side, my jaw dropped.

It can't be...

“Arthur?” The name spilled from my lips.

The knight turned to face me, and there he was: Arthur, my very own son.

“You’ve done well.” He offered us a strangely formal greeting and a reverent dip of his head, averting his gaze.

One of the enemies hollered, emboldened by Arthur’s timid display. His fellow soldiers joined him in surging toward us again.

Then Arthur cut down all ten men at once. He sliced through the necks of the advancing enemies as he sailed past them, his strikes perfectly aimed at any joint not protected by armor. Arthur plowed forward with that momentum, slaying the troops as he went, felling them one after another. With one swift motion, the enemy soldiers exploded into showers of blood.

“Don’t come near us.” His curt warning contained more malice than all of the enemy forces combined.

Distant riflemen readied their guns nonetheless, and Arthur scooped up a sword from one of his victims. He hurled it like a spear, skewering two men at once.

Then he fixed his eyes on me. “I’ll cover you if you’re retreating,

Commander.”

The enemy hadn’t reached us yet. If we could fall back just a few dozen meters, we would reach the cliff, and the able-bodied members of the order could retrieve the injured knights. Arthur was offering us a means to escape this horrible situation and regroup.

“Okay. Once all the knights are evacuated...” Arthur continued, not waiting for my reply. He spoke with command, as though announcing his intent rather than asking for permission. “I’m going to head to the enemy camp directly.”

He pointed ahead at the enemy base, his gaze unwavering as he stared at the distant clifftop.

“Will you join me, Commander?”

He grinned, and it was the first time he’d shown such a brash smile since swooping into this battle. I wasn’t just Arthur’s commander in the order; I was also his father. And I could see that there was challenge in his expression, something out of character for him.



“Who do you think you’re asking?” I answered, my lips tugging up in a smirk of my own as I tested his mettle. “Of course I’m coming.”

I joined him at his side. The knights behind me were helping the injured men up. They’d rushed over to aid in the retreat, taking people back to our camp as quickly as possible. Arthur and I followed them, running backward in the same direction. The enemies weren’t going to let us off that easily. They chased after us, making the earth tremble beneath their pounding feet.

Arthur and I plunged our swords into the ones closest to us.

“Why’d you come down here alone?!” I demanded as we fought. “Don’t you get why the knights are waiting on top of the cliffs?!”

“Y-you’re really lecturing me right now?!”

Something sparked within all our enemies at once. They threw their swords at me, forcing me to use my own blade as well as my special power to block their attacks. Arthur seized the opportunity to fly in and cut them down. The sweep of his sword was little more than a flash of light, and then blood sprayed into the air. We kicked the injured enemies away and kept moving.

“Why *shouldn’t* I have come?!” Arthur asked me, though he cooled a bit as he continued to speak. “I... The whole reason I wanted to become a knight was...”

“I bet you’ve almost gotten yourself killed a bunch of other times too, and you kept it from me and Mom.”

The words Arthur had said so long ago suddenly replayed in my mind.

Our enemies had frozen after seeing the men in front get kicked backward. He used their hesitation as a chance to charge forward and fell even more of them. Enemy riflemen raised their guns, but before they could pull a single trigger, I fired at them first.

“I wanted to join the Eighth Squadron because...”

“Just so you know, you won’t be able to hide it from me anymore.”

Six years ago. Those words echoing in my head were from six whole years ago. Back then, Arthur had given up on being a knight. But on that day, he told me he’d changed his mind.

This time, the enemies in front of us took out their rifles in tandem. Before they could lift their weapons, Arthur and I leapt forward together and chopped them down. They dropped their guns as their hot blood splattered against our cheeks.

Soldiers pulled up at the very rear of the battle, their guns a distant glint. I readied myself to face them, but Arthur jumped in before I could take aim. He raised an enemy sword high.

“It was all...so I could stand beside you, like I am right now!”

Arthur hurled the sword. The enemy didn’t even have the chance to fire; the blade pierced through their necks.

“Cause I’ll be there with you on the battlefield next time.”

That was what Arthur had said six years ago. Neither Vice Commander Clark nor I understood why he wanted to join the Eighth Squadron at the time. All he told us was that there was something he wanted to do.

The Eighth Squadron operated in a different style than the other units; its members were fiercely independent. Arthur had chosen it for a reason. The Eighth Squadron’s special privileges allowed its members to operate under their own discretion. On a battlefield or during an operation, they could act however they deemed best. With my unit gone, only the Eighth could choose to stand with me.

Arthur retrieved his sword and slashed his way through the enemies before him.

I shook myself out of my reverie to focus on the enemies around us. My own men were still retreating. I backpedaled to stay near them and grabbed Arthur’s uniform. He stumbled, surprised by my tug, so I barked out, “Keep your back against mine!”

I never thought I’d get to feel that same joy again at a time like this.

“Yes, sir!” Arthur held up his sword and glanced backward.

I swallowed down the passion surging in my chest. It longed to burst free and overwhelm me, but I needed to stand firm with the vice captain of the Eighth

Squadron and fight. I gripped my sword. By the time I took a single breath, the enemy had regrouped and were flying at us with swords raised.

“Take them out while you retreat!” I said. “Don’t take a single step further into enemy territory! Stay with the men we need to protect and make sure they get out alive!”

I fought off multiple attacks while giving Arthur my orders. We had to stay together in a tight formation. He was only one man, after all.

One knight had come as a reinforcement, yet he faced a swarm of enemies. It was unthinkable for a single soldier to change the tide of a battle.

He was just one knight—but uninjured and brimming with youthful energy. And this one knight had been promoted to vice captain of the Eighth Squadron earlier in the year. He was just one knight—but also the youngest vice captain in the history of the order. The one knight who’d dueled every other knight in the order, aside from the captains and vice captains, to win the coveted title of imperial knight. Just one knight who, right before my very eyes, was cutting down ten enemies with each slash of his sword.

That one knight was my son—my pride and joy.

“I’m not goin’ anywhere, obviously!” he yelled right back as he took out any enemy foolish enough to go after the retreating knights.

Just one knight. But somehow, I knew there was no chance of defeat now.

“Fight at my side, Arthur Beresford!”

It all started about half an hour ago.

“I’m sorry for the delay, Arthur!”

Princess Pride had just teleported back to the tower after meeting with Prince Leon. She apologized for leaving me in charge while she was gone. I responded in a daze, too distracted to pay attention as Her Highness told King Lance and the others that Anemone was joining the war. All I could think about was the transmission from the front lines in the north.

The unexplained explosions had started up again. And no matter how many

times I asked for reports from the north, I never once heard my dad respond. The communication specialist could only tell me that the knights' status after the bombings was still unknown—commander included. That was when I knew I had to go.

“Huh?!” Princess Pride cried.

Prime Minister Gilbert followed up with, *“The soldiers are currently bringing in a vital witness who can testify as to the current state of the battle.”* But a status report wouldn't change the fact that Dad and his knights were being targeted right now.

“Your Highness.”

My voice came out deeper and steadier than even I expected. Princess Pride turned her purple eyes on me. I really didn't want to leave her side, but I had no choice.

“I will protect you,” I told her. “This sword exists to keep you safe.”

I want nothing more than to protect her. That's why I want to be with her and stay by her side so badly. But I'm still a knight, after all.

I set my hand on the pommel of my sword and wrapped one finger at a time around the grip. The metal sang beneath my fingertips, reminding me of the battle to come. With a sigh, I released the words I knew I needed to tell Princess Pride since the moment she'd returned to the tower.

“That's also why I have to go.”

Somehow, I managed to remain calm as I delivered the news. I didn't know if I would make it in time. The front lines in the north were far from here, and the trip would be a long one, even by horse.

Nevertheless, I couldn't just stand around and helplessly watch the action through a damn transmission again. I didn't want a repeat of what happened all those years ago.

Princess Pride nodded. Her eyes never left mine as she agreed to my request. I didn't even realize what joy her response gave me until I felt the smile tugging at my lips. I was finally the one who got to head to the battlefield, not her.

“I’m gonna bring this war to an end,” I declared.

I was so proud of myself. Finally, I had an opportunity to be the one to run in and help.

As a member of the Eighth Squadron, I was free to act as I pleased. I could stay at her side the whole time, or I could go help Dad, the commander of the order. That freedom was the whole reason I’d wanted to join this unit in the first place.

“Good luck out there, Arthur,” she said gently.

For a moment, I hardly breathed. It was so unusual hearing her speak with anything less than forceful command. Princess Pride took another step toward me. I stiffened as she reached her fingers out and gently stroked my silver ponytail. Then she brought her hand to my cheek.

“I know you can do it.”

My eyes flew wide. I couldn’t tear my gaze from the smile on her face, bright and warm as a ray of sunlight. Heat balled in my chest and spread throughout my entire body. I really felt like I could make it in time. I had to ball my hands into fists to keep from shuddering.

Instead of lowering her hand, Princess Pride brought her other one up to my other cheek. She clasped my face between her hands and stared straight up into my eyes.

“That’s because...” Her clear voice trailed off. Between the electric sensation from her fingers on my skin and the sight of her beautiful face so close to mine, I could hardly stay on my feet. The world whirled around me, as though I were drifting through a dream. I had no idea what she was going to say next.

“You’re my hero, Arthur. You always have been.”

Her words were like a splash of cold water in the face. *Her hero!* I could conceive of no higher honor. I was absolutely over the moon. In that moment, I truly believed I could die on the spot and have no regrets. She had been *my* hero ever since I first met her.

Princess Pride squeezed my face just a little bit more, pulling it down closer to

hers. She stood on tiptoe, tilting her head upward, and then...she pressed her lips to my forehead.

My heart stopped when those tender lips brushed the thin skin of my brow. Electricity sizzled through my body to the very tips of my fingers. I froze, body going stiff and mind churning to a halt as the heady scent of flowers filled my nose.

“It’s for good luck,” she said in silky-soft tones, “so you’ll make it home safely. It’s from Tiara and Stale too.”

A good-luck charm. I knew what the kiss meant, and I likewise understood that she was in total support of my decision to go to the battlefield. It was the ultimate validation of me as her knight. I wasn’t the little kid from six years ago who could do nothing but sit there and cry. Princess Pride herself was acknowledging that.

My face burned. I couldn’t even manage to blink. Princess Pride lowered herself back onto her heels, but remained so close I could have leaned forward and brought our foreheads together. Years ago, all I could do was stare up at her. Now she was sending me off to war as her hero.

The numbness slowly ebbed, and my breathing steadied. I still felt like I was floating, and I couldn’t convince my lips to stop smiling. Once I finally remembered to blink, I found a hero smiling back at me—one I’d always looked up to.

With a sweeping bow, I expressed my deepest gratitude. I told Captain Alan and Captain Callum to look after her, unsheathed my sword, and stepped up onto the windowsill. I was prepared to take the plunge onto the battlefield. There was no time to bother with the spiral staircase; I had to get to Dad as quickly as possible.

“I’ll return as soon as I can,” I said.

The princess smiled at my parting words. I etched the image of her into my mind as I leapt out of the window. I gave myself up to the momentary sensation of weightlessness, focusing on my destination.

“Damn it, Arthur!”

I was already falling when the voice called out to me. I turned in midair to find Stale right beside me.

“Stale?!” I cried. “What the hell are you doing?!”

He must have teleported to me. But Stale would never be able to handle this fall like I could. I opened my mouth, ready to ask him why in the world he’d come with me.

“Don’t you need my help?!” he shouted.

The look on his face said it wasn’t a question—it was an offer. He was twisting around in the air, but there was a triumphant smirk on his face.

I understood right away. I flashed my friend a toothy grin, feeling appreciative.

“I sure do!”

I reached for Stale’s shoulder. For just a second, I caught a glimpse of my face in the reflection of Stale’s eyes. I looked so damn full of life.

“I need it more than anything!” I said.

With that, Stale reached out for me as well. The grin on his face was as intense as mine. A light shone in the darkness of his jet-black eyes. Though it should have been obvious, I realized that Princess Pride wasn’t the only person rooting for my success on the battlefield.

Our fingertips grazed as we stretched toward each other. Finally, we found our grip and clasped our hands together. Just before the scene before me vanished, Stale sent me off with one last shout of encouragement.

“Get it done, Arthur Beresford!”

The world disappeared. When it returned, I had arrived at the battlefield where my dad was fighting.

“Stay back... I told you not to come any closer!”

My sword locked against an enemy blade before I kicked him away. I took him out with a swift chop to his neck. The next soldier leveled his gun at me, so I

switched to mine too, shooting him through the forehead before he could so much as blink. An enemy in front of me used this opportunity to charge, but I scooped up my sword and ran him through in one swift motion.

Everyone within reach of my blade was dead. I walked backward, keeping up with the retreating knights. Guns cocked around me, but when I turned to the sound, ready to unleash more death, I found the weapons aimed at Dad instead of me.

“Get down!” I cried.

I picked up a sword off a fallen enemy and tossed it at the soldiers with the rifles. Screams rose and flesh squelched as it pierced two of them at once.

“Did Harrison teach you that?” Dad asked, amused.

He was still crouching as he hacked at the enemies’ legs and sent them flying backward with kicks. Most of the knights had reached the bottom of the cliff by now, so I moved back another few meters.

“He didn’t *teach* me!” I replied. “That guy’s always throwing knives and swords straight at us!”

More and more people in the Eighth Squadron had picked up throwing knives after watching how Captain Harrison fought. Personally, I preferred a sword. Not that chucking a sword was something I’d given much thought before now.

Enemy soldiers pressed closer. Gunshots rang out in the distance. Dad and I leapt to dodge the bullets before charging the new wave.

“All units! Fire at the enemy!” Vice Commander Eric shouted.

Bang bang bang! Hundreds of bullets cracked through the air, mowing down our foes.

I glanced behind us and found that the knights at the top of the cliff weren’t just our usual riflemen. These other knights pointed brand-new firearms at the enemies across the crater, as well as the ones pursuing us across it. The extra weapons must have come from Prince Leon and Stale.

The bullets pierced right through the enemies’ armor. I wasn’t sure whether it was because they were a lot closer now or the guns were just that high-quality.

“This will help us endure a bit longer!” Dad said.

He retrieved a sword off an enemy who’d died in the gunfire. With his other hand, he plunged his own sword into the body of an approaching soldier, then pushed that man into another one behind him.

Dad wasn’t going to beat me that easily. I sliced down one enemy after another. At one point, my sword got stuck in a man’s body. A different man used that as a chance to rush me. I was forced to let go of my sword, grab his arm, and send him hurtling to the ground. This time, I quickly yanked my sword free and finished him off.

The fighting down in the crater had gotten easier now that we had the support of the knights firing atop the cliff. The enemy hesitated to charge us, fearful of the hail of bullets, which gave Dad and me a chance to cut down anyone foolish enough to advance on us.

Just as Dad had predicted, the slowdown in the battle’s momentum only made it easier for us to do our thing. The knights carrying the injured had just reached the camp at the top of the cliff. Meanwhile, other knights lowered ropes to assist anyone who could still climb on their own. They hauled up the most severely injured using special powers.

I kept looking back at them to check their progress as I dodged bullets and swung my sword at our adversaries.

“Commander Roderick! Vice Captain Arthur! All of our men have made it out of the crater!” one knight shouted.

Dad and I both turned, confirming that the evacuation was indeed over and all the injured knights had reached safety.

“Hell yes!” I whooped.

“Let’s go, Arthur! We’re joining them up there!”

I shouted my agreement before cutting down ten enemies hoping to hinder us. Next, I sliced away the men fighting Dad, piercing their sides and then knocking them down with my fists. With our path clear, we sprinted for the cliffside.

We ran as hard as we could with our backs to the enemy. They chased after us, but the covering fire from the rest of the order gave us a steep advantage. I turned just enough to see if anyone was still trying to attack us and spotted a soldier aiming his gun right at me. I watched him, knowing the angle meant I couldn't evade it. Right before he could fire, he collapsed instead, a bullet in his head. I swiveled back around to find Vice Captain Eric and a group of knights with special powers for firearms aiming past me.

"Don't let them get away! That big one's their commander!" Vice Captain Eric ordered.

One of the enemy soldiers spurred his horse straight at Dad, raising his sword high. But he soon collapsed, struck by bullets from above. All this still wasn't enough to stop the mass of soldiers from charging at us, though.

We're not gonna have enough time for either of us to climb the ropes at this rate, I thought as I ran.

The knights were supporting us from above, but we'd be sitting ducks for attacks as we climbed those ropes.

"Commander, I'm goin' up ahead!" I shouted, willing my legs to go faster.

A rope dangled in front of me once I reached the base of the cliff. Instead of grabbing it, I turned back toward Dad and got down on my knees.

"I'll send you up!"

Dad's eyes went wide when I shouted at him. He shot me a questioning look, but I refused to back down. When he picked up speed, I knew he'd made up his mind. He jumped forward, and once his feet landed on my hands, I launched him up with all the force I could muster.

In the blink of an eye, Dad shot straight up to the top of the cliffs. He looked like he was on the verge of tipping over from the momentum, but he landed on both feet with a thud and kept his balance. A flurry of cheers greeted his arrival.

"Arthur, get up here quick!" Vice Captain Eric called, louder than the rest.

"Got it!"

I stood, digging my heels into the ground to keep from toppling over. The

enemy was getting closer. I needed a running start, but I wouldn't have time for that with those soldiers so near.

Out of other options, I picked up an enemy's sword at my feet and threw it as high as I could. With a *crunch*, it sank into the cliff wall. Figuring it was deep enough, I jumped up into the air after it.

I couldn't make it to the top without that running start, so I landed on the sword sticking out of the cliffside. All it took was one more powerful leap for me to reach the very top of the cliffs. By the time I looked down, the sword was collapsing along with the wall. The landslide buried the enemy soldiers pursuing me. I yanked the rope back up just to make sure no survivors could follow.

"Sorry that I didn't use the rope you sent down there for me," I said to the senior knight who'd supplied the rope. When I went to hand it back to him, he gaped at me like I had two heads. Perplexed, I braced myself. "What's the matter?" Had I missed something?

"Arthur, what the hell is your special power?" a knight called out.

I spun toward the voice to see Vice Captain Eric and Dad staring at me with unblinking eyes. Our riflemen continued to fire at the enemy soldiers, but everyone else was openly gawking at me.

Suddenly nervous, I squeezed the sword at my hip. "It's the power...to make plants grow healthy." That only seemed to confuse them more, but I couldn't reveal the whole truth. One of the knights asked how the hell I was so physically gifted.

"Is it the same power as your captain?!"

"How could you send the commander flying up so high?!"

"How many meters was that?! You didn't even get a running start at it!"

"You appeared out of nowhere, like His Highness..."

One after another, they voiced their speculation and amazement. I wanted to offer some sort of response—that Dad only got that far because he was a great jumper, that Captain Alan was stronger and a better jumper than me, or whatever else. But my senior knights were all patting me on the back and telling

me what a good job I did, so it was hard to reply.

“All units! Attention!” Dad barked.

Everyone fell silent, standing up straighter. Dad leveled a stern glare at each of us in turn. I swallowed down my anxiety.

“The only thing we’ve done is escape danger—just this once. This is far from over,” he said, crossing his arms.

I could tell that he’d already caught his breath. We all knew he was really telling us not to let our guard down.

“We’ll celebrate later. First, I want communication specialists to make reports to all bases. Tell them that every unit should rearm themselves if they’ve received weapons provisions. Don’t stop firing at the enemies. We’ve made it out of the craters and we’re back on the high ground. All captains need to contact me with damage reports. We can’t relax until we know where the bombings are coming from. Until then, the whole lot of us need to prepare for more explosions.”

The knights responded affirmatively to each of Dad’s orders. He was right; we were still under attack. Though we’d handled the aftermath of the blasts, we didn’t know what the enemy might throw at us next.

“Once you’re prepared for battle and have finalized your formations and war plans, we’ll divide up into squadrons and charge the enemy base,” Dad said.

I’d been looking down at my feet, but I whipped my head up at that. Our eyes locked. He then moved his gaze across all the other knights.

“Riflemen will continue to protect our base and provide covering fire. Anyone else who can move, follow me.”

We raised our voices in agreement. Dad met my eyes one last time. *“I’m sure that’ll include you,”* he seemed to be saying. I nodded back and raised my chin, prepared to meet the enemy again.

Chinensis was one wing of the United Hanazuo Kingdom and the Rajah Empire’s original target in this war. The people of Hanazuo, with Freesia and

Anemone for support, were putting their lives on the line to protect the eastern tower, western tower, and front lines to the north. They were also protecting me, the king of Chinensis.

“Once we’re ready for battle at the western tower, we’ll be heading out to support Cercis!”

“We’ve finished preparing at the eastern tower! We’re coming to you now for backup, Yohan!”

Princess Pride was in the western tower, close to the border. It was there she’d dispatched reinforcements to Cercis. From the eastern tower, Lance instructed troops to head south and join me at the castle. I watched the broadcasts and took in the reports from Freesia’s communication specialists, but remained silent.

The war would end as soon as I surrendered. I gazed at Princess Pride and Lance through the images, steeling my resolve as the Chinensian king.

That was when the situation took a very sudden turn: Chinensis was attacked from the south. My guards reported that the southern castle wall had been destroyed. It was an ambush from the territory behind the castle. Thanks to the information Prime Minister Gilbert had extracted from Lord Hanmu, both our towers were ready to react.

A soldier rushed into the room. “King Yohan, enemy troops have broken through the southern wall of the castle!” The man pointed southward, sweat dripping down his face. He was clearly shaken to his core, and I understood why.

Originally, we’d planned this defensive war under the assumption that I was Rajah’s ultimate target. Our goal was for the knights and soldiers to prevent enemies from approaching my castle while also stopping invasions from the north, western tower, eastern tower, and various other locations. But with our attention drawn to the barrage of bombs, we’d failed to notice the approach of the enemy from the southern border. The castle wasn’t defended well enough to repel this latest attack. Enemy troops would surely overwhelm us. Already, thunderous voices roared outside the castle. Lance was heading our way, but the enemy would reach me first.

War cries rose outside. The only relief I felt was knowing that none of my people resided along the now-broken castle wall. This also made it easier for the enemy to breach our southern castle, since little stood in their way. Compared to losing Chinensian citizens, though, this was the preferred outcome.

“God...I thank you for your mercy.”

I spoke quietly enough that no one would hear me through the broadcast. I’d never imagined that Cercis would become the first target of this invasion. Perhaps it was because they knew Freesia would support us, or maybe their intention was always to crush the United Hanazuo Kingdom entirely. If we were defeated here, we’d lose not only Cercis but also the Freesian crown princess, thanks to her blood oath.

I gripped the sword at my hip with trembling hands. I was prepared to die—offering up my own life to God was something I’d always been ready to do.

Footsteps pounded toward my door, a torturous sound in these circumstances. Roars and whoops echoed in the halls, but I could not tell if they belonged to friends or foes. Metal clashed and screams pierced the din. It could have been my castle’s soldiers or maybe Freesian knights; either way, they were sacrificing their lives for us.

Guards and communication specialist knights surrounded me. They readied their weapons, glaring at the door as it rattled under the enemy’s assault.

I couldn’t die yet. I couldn’t surrender either. Being defeated now would seal more than just my own fate. There was Chinensis and its people, Cercis and its citizens, and Princess Pride of Freesia, among others. I couldn’t condemn them all to such a horrible end.

I pulled out my sword and faced the door, then glanced at the window. Could the enemy come crashing in that way instead? I tried to position myself so that I covered both points, even as screams and gunshots continued just beyond the door.

“Don’t be afraid, King Yohan.”

A calm, quiet voice reached my ears. I whirled toward the broadcast to find

Prince Stale speaking to me.

“Your Majesty, do you recall the earlier report? Word reached you that Commander Roderick and a vice captain held off the invading troops and safely evacuated the injured knights back to their camp.”

I did indeed. When I heard the news that just two men had fought off countless enemy soldiers, I couldn't believe my ears. It was beyond comprehension. But it was true that the Freesian knights had yet to suffer a single casualty.

“That vice captain's name is Arthur Beresford. He was promoted to vice captain of the Eighth Squadron this very year. The five knights stationed at your castle belong to that same unit.”

I gulped at Prince Stale's words. At yesterday's strategy meeting, I'd mentioned my plans to have only communication specialist knights and Chinensian soldiers stationed at my castle. Immediately after, Prince Stale had pointed not at the northern front lines, where we imagined the bulk of the invasion would take place, but rather at the area south of my castle.

“If it were me,” he'd said, “this is where I would attack. Please allow me to send a few of our knights to your castle, just to be safe.”

“Those knights were personally selected by Prime Minister Gilbert and Commander Roderick after I requested defense for your castle,” he said now.

I never imagined such a thing would be necessary. Preventing the enemy from reaching the castle was our entire goal in the first place. We didn't think a country like Copelandii would bother devising such sneaky strategies to attack a tiny country like ours.

Most of all, it didn't seem like a smart plan to leave multiple knights here when we were already so outnumbered by enemy soldiers elsewhere. I'd wanted to divide up our fighting power among the main camps instead of devoting resources to a secondary target like my castle. But Prince Stale insisted that I take just five knights for protection, which Lance and I both agreed wouldn't negatively influence the tide of the war.

Prince Stale was truly a clever man. His judgment at the meeting had been

correct. We were ambushed from the south, exactly as he feared. I bitterly wished I'd taken His Highness's advice right from the start and allotted more manpower to the castle.

As I prayed for forgiveness, Prince Stale continued speaking as calmly as ever. Even with this turn of events, his expressionless face did not waver.

Crack!

The window shattered in a shower of glass. I dropped to the floor, and my guards covered me to protect me from the shards. From where I lay, I could just make out some newcomer's legs.

"So this is the king's room?!"

"We're the first inside!"

"You're tellin' me that twig's the king?!"

A roar of voices rushed toward me. These intruders must have scaled the castle wall to smash their way in through the window. And now that they'd found a route inside, more would surely follow from below...or so I thought.

Something tore, and the enemy soldiers vanished from the window. A second later, there came a high-pitched scream. Even the enemies already inside the room froze in confusion. Just as one tried to stick his head out and see what was happening, a blade slashed through his neck.

"These men are the best of the best," Prince Stale said. "They've served in the Eighth Squadron even longer than Vice Captain Arthur. That especially goes for one of them..."

The enemy soldiers cried out in fear and confusion. Yet Prince Stale and the prime minister both looked terrifyingly composed. Cedric, standing beside Prime Minister Gilbert in the transmission, was the only one shouting with concern. Another pained scream reached my ears. I worried it was one of my own men, but then I realized no one had yet managed to kick down my door and barge into the room.

"What the hell are you doing?!" an enemy shouted.

The remaining foes leveled their firearms at us. My guards responded with

their own rifles, taking up a defensive position. Terrified by the unexplained disappearance of their fellow soldiers, the enemy looked on the verge of panic—prepared to pull their triggers and shoot wildly and hysterically.

A black shadow appeared out of nowhere.

“You there. How dare you think you can sneak past me to get to the king?!”

It was truly instantaneous. A slight breeze tickled my cheek, then a knight stood before me where no one had been a moment ago. He planted himself behind the men who’d entered through the window. Through a mess of long, black hair, his purple eyes burned like embers.

“Their leader, Captain Harrison Dirk.”

An enemy who’d been on the verge of firing whirled around...but it was already too late. Captain Harrison chopped off his hand. It fell still gripping the trigger. More blood sprayed into the air, and suddenly the other intruders collapsed.

Only the man who’d lost his hand was still alive. He howled in pain, clutching at his spurting stump of an arm. The black-haired knight approached him from behind and kicked him to the ground.

“The man in front of you right now, Your Majesty, is Vice Captain Arthur’s direct superior.” Prince Stale spoke as though he’d expected this outcome from the start.

Captain Harrison raised his head. He glared through his jagged bangs at the man beneath his boot. “Why did you try to sneak past me by going through the window? Answer me.”

Even though I wasn’t his target, I shrank away from his icy gaze. Captain Harrison’s victim only managed more ungodly wails. The captain ground his boot into the man’s back.

“Can’t speak? Very well. I have no use for a man weak enough to lose his fighting spirit after a single severed hand.”

With that, the captain brought his sword down, silencing the vulnerable enemy soldier in one swift blow. He kept his sword out and glanced around the

room to ensure no other enemies lurked about. Then he bowed toward me and the people watching us through the broadcast before promptly disappearing again. A breeze whispered past me, just like when he'd appeared. For a second I worried I'd imagined the whole thing.

"My apologies, King Yohan," Prime Minister Gilbert said, eerily at ease. *"The members of the Eighth Squadron are a bit unique, but none of them will ever fail a mission. I hope you can pardon their occasional lack of manners."*

I blinked, simply trying to make sense of the broken glass and slaughtered intruders all around me. "That's perfectly fine," I eventually responded, turning to the window.

Outside, there was nothing but silence. The Eighth Squadron must have been responsible for that. I was willing to bet that Captain Harrison was to thank for the fact that the enemy had never breached the door as well.

"Their orders are to guard everyone inside the castle—including you, Your Majesty—and eliminate any enemy intruders," Prince Stale said, and I flicked my gaze back to the broadcast. *"Anyone who broke through the southern wall will be dealt with by other knights, guards, or King Lance's soldiers...but please leave your safety and that of your castle in the Eighth Squadron's hands."*

He wore a serene grin, as though all of this was so predictable and routine. I regarded the young prince more warily. He had *known* to station five knights of the Eighth Squadron here at my castle today. He'd even managed to convince Lance and me that a mere five knights could get the job done, asking Prime Minister Gilbert and Commander Roderick to specially select men who could protect the castle.

The plan was incredibly well calculated. None of us had even realized all the thought that had gone into it until it unfolded.

"If it were me, this is where I would attack." The prince's words echoed in my head—more so than the looming invasion of Copelandii or Rajah, more so than even the knights of the Eighth Squadron who cut down foes in the blink of an eye. The only thing I could think about was how the young strategist, Prince Stale, would surely make for the most terrifying enemy of all.

“Prince Cedric! Please don’t stand so close to the window!”

My guards shouted and pulled me backward. The battle cries of our enemies still rang in my ears, growing into a yowl of pure rage. That cacophony came from just outside the window, where a swell of enemy troops surged over the ground, their bloodlust a palpable miasma.

“We were outnumbered, then. I bet they broke through the first barrier,” Prince Stale said with a click of his tongue.

The enemies had likely made it through the castle gates. Even more spilled toward us now. Still, we had guards and knights inside the castle yet; we would survive if we just held out until Pride’s reinforcements showed up. If we *couldn’t* hold our ground that long, the enemy would surely flood into this very room and slaughter every last one of us.

Prince Stale had been with Pride at the western tower, but he teleported here to serve as the first wave of backup. I had to sit back in the castle, powerless, while Prince Stale worked out a plan for us. No, not “worked out.” He was already carrying out whatever plan he’d devised.

“Gilbert! Away from the window!” Prince Stale shouted.

Prime Minister Gilbert was creeping up to the same window I’d just been told to stay away from. He assessed the enemy troops below, but doing so placed him in the sights of enemy firearms. The knights rushed forward to drag him back when an enemy appeared at the window.

Princess Tiara let out a shriek. Another knight raced over to deal with the intruder.

There had to be more scaling the castle walls. They started popping up in the window, just like they’d attacked the Chinensian castle. When they spotted us, they acted swiftly to kick the window open, but not swiftly enough. Prime Minister Gilbert got there first, smashing the window with his fist so he could grab the enemy by the neck and lift him up.

“Greetings, sir,” he said. “What an amusing fellow you are, sneaking in through the window for a little rendezvous.”

Glass lay scattered around them. Prime Minister Gilbert easily swung the man

inside with one hand and slammed him into the ground. The blow sounded incredibly painful. Before the man could regain his footing, knights surrounded him.

“We should take them out before they can climb up,” Prime Minister Gilbert declared, staring back out the broken window.

Someone shot at him from below, but he sidestepped it with ease. With each new enemy who tried to climb into the room, Prime Minister Gilbert stomped on their hands and bashed in their faces to send them crashing back down. He signaled for the knights and guards behind him to shoot down at the attackers.

“I apologize for breaking your window, Prince Cedric,” he said lightly. “I simply thought it would be better to get the jump on them.”

All I could do was stutter back at the smiling prime minister. He left the defense of the window to the guards and strolled over to the first enemy he’d pulled into the room.

“I really did feel like there were too many of you,” he said. “The communication specialists made the front lines to the north sound like the main battle, yet you also attacked the castle head-on. With so many men split between two places, you attempt to invade in the south as well? You’re spreading yourselves too thin.”

Prime Minister Gilbert smiled wider at the restrained enemy soldier. He looked the man up and down, then nodded to himself.

“These men must be slaves from Copelandii or one of the other two countries. They thought they could send out soldiers with no combat training and overwhelm the castle with numbers alone. Does that sound about right?”

Despite framing it as a question, he looked like he already knew the answer. One of the knights jabbed a sword into the enemy’s neck, and the man gulped before nodding his head over and over. Satisfied, Prime Minister Gilbert thanked the man and ordered the guards to take him away.

“He’s very honest. Perhaps he has some valuable information. Please place him in the same cell as Lord Hanmu—you may find him much more helpful than the latter.”

Lord Hanmu paled at the idea of sharing a cell with an enemy soldier. The guards unceremoniously hauled them both off.

“Take a knight along with you, since the enemies are drawing so near. If you find yourself with no other option, you may leave the prisoners behind to escape. I would like both guards and knights to flee together if necessary.”

Prime Minister Gilbert delivered that terrifying order just as softly as everything else. The slave soldier left the room without resisting, but Lord Hanmu struggled against the guards. He even begged *me* for help. First it was, “Let’s save Cercis together,” and then, “But you’re its true leader!” It turned my stomach. Refusing to meet his eyes, I squeezed the pendant under my shirt until he was out of the room.

“These individual soldiers don’t seem very good at fighting,” Prime Minister Gilbert went on. “I’m sure we can defend the castle easily as long as we keep a cool head. On individual power alone, we certainly have the advantage.”

From behind him, Prince Stale glared and pushed on the black frames of his glasses...until his eyes suddenly went wide.

“Elder Sister!”

It happened in a flash. His head jerked toward the window like he’d just heard something, and then he disappeared. It had to be that teleportation power of his.

“What the hell was that?!” I asked. “Where’d Prince Stale go?! There’s no way he just heard Pride calling for him.”

The cacophony kicked up by the enemy troops would have drowned that out for sure. Plus, she couldn’t have arrived at the castle so soon. Could she? I rushed to a window to check.

“Stand back, Prince Cedric! Stay away from the—”

Crack! Crack crack!

Just as a knight warned me to get back, the window exploded.

This time, they were dropping down from the roof on ropes. Like pendulums, they swung straight for each window and rammed through the glass. I froze in

shock from the abruptness of it. All I could do was turn and cover my body with my jacket to block the shards of glass raining into the room. An enemy soldier swung inside and immediately lunged at me with a knife.

Thunk!

Red erupted before me—the blood of the enemy. A knife stuck out of my would-be assassin’s throat. After a gurgle, the man collapsed. I turned to find my rescuer, and my eyes nearly popped out of my head. Everyone else was just as aghast.

“Princess Tiara?!”

Her blonde ponytail was still swaying from the force of her throw. She glared back with ferocity, the spitting image of her older sister.

Logically, I knew it couldn’t have come from her, but my eyes told me differently. The dead man had a knife in his neck, and its handle led right back to her. Princess Tiara had yet to stand from her throwing position, and she was staring me down.

“Did you just—”

“Please don’t move, Prince Cedric. It’s dangerous.”

Fwoosh! Swish! Swoosh!

She cut me off when I tried to question her. Silver trails whisked past me as she flung tiny knives hidden all over her body. The moment the knives whistled past, death rattles burst out behind me. I spun on my heel and found every single enemy soldier who’d crashed into the room now collapsed on the floor with knives jutting from their prone bodies.

The guards brushed past me a moment later to shoot out of the windows. The sharp cracks of guns firing jolted us all back to our senses.

“Princess Tiara! What did you do?!” Prime Minister Gilbert asked. Even he was staring at her with his mouth wide open.

By the look of it, I wasn’t the only one who’d never suspected she was more than just a fragile princess. The prime minister seemed more ruffled by this than by several enemies bursting into the room. Princess Tiara merely dipped

her head at him.

“I’m sorry, Prime Minister Gilbert,” Princess Tiara said. “Big Sister and Big Brother don’t know about this either.”

Her tiny eyebrows drooped back into a dainty expression, and she seemed for all the world like the same Princess Tiara I’d always known. Prime Minister Gilbert and the Freesian knights stared at her, speechless.

“Princess Tiara,” I managed. “Don’t tell me... The other day, you actually...?”

The memory was still fresh. Considering the situation and our positions, it couldn’t have been anyone but her. It hadn’t even crossed my mind at the time, but now I was certain.

Princess Tiara scrunched her brow while I struggled to form words. It was nothing like the delicate look she’d shown Prime Minister Gilbert. She pressed her finger to her lips and shushed me, urging me to drop the subject.

So it is true.

I closed my mouth as she demanded, and she strode up to me.

“Please don’t misunderstand,” she said. “I’m still just as mad at you!”

She puffed out her little cheeks and glared up at me. It brought me right back to when she’d lashed out at me in hatred. I blinked down at her mutely. She whirled around, her golden ponytail smacking me in the nose, and raced back to Prime Minister Gilbert.

She was still mad at me. That meant she’d just been hiding her anger ever since the battle broke out. Her words churned in my mind as I surveyed the dead bodies. I crouched to get a closer look at one. The hilts of her knives jutted from their flesh; I yanked them free to get a closer look. They seemed ordinary enough, but they were definitely the same slender knives I’d seen before.

Cleaning the blood off the blades, I stowed them in my jacket. They were the only type of weapon I could use right now. I couldn’t put my life on the line for my country like our soldiers, couldn’t overwhelm the enemy like the knights, couldn’t command troops like Yohan and Pride. I wasn’t even someone worth protecting like Lance.

Pride, a woman, was putting her life on the line in battle. Stale, the younger prince, was commanding the situation and strategizing. Prime Minister Gilbert was cutting down enemies himself. Even the second-born princess, a girl far younger than me, was fighting.

I was the only powerless one, forced to sit back and contribute nothing whatsoever.

“All units, charge! Eliminate the enemies approaching the castle and make a path for me to go forward!”

We still had troops headed in our direction; I had to issue orders to my knights before they reached us. I leapt onto my horse and surged forward. The Cercian castle lay just ahead.

Our foes surrounded the walls, but my knights and I didn't even slow at the sight. In fact, the moment we'd heard about the enemies charging the castle, we'd left the western tower to rush in as backup. The road was already a war zone by the time we reached it; even civilians were being attacked. Knights leapt in to aid them, but it trapped them there on the road. The farther we proceeded, the more we got sucked into these side battles in our attempt to guide citizens to safety. Before long, I had to whistle for Stale to join us.



He teleported to me without a moment's delay, but scowled nonetheless. "Elder Sister!" he greeted me as soon as he appeared, then looked all around. "What's happening?"

He must have assumed I was in some immediate danger. The last time I'd whistled for his help, I was falling off a cliff.

He leapt onto a waiting horse and drew his blade, ready to take on the distant enemies. "I'll join you in pushing toward the castle," he said. "I'd like to see the battle for myself, since we were all worried about this."

Captain Callum and Captain Alan rode at my sides, while the rest of the knights gathered protectively around Stale. The enemies turned from the castle, their target, to face our new charge. They raised their swords and roared, pointing their guns at us. My knights took them down before they could pull the trigger.

Our knights had their rifles trained on the enemy in an instant. They fired from horseback, some using special powers to ensure every bullet struck an enemy firearm. While the enemy scrambled to recover their weapons, another knight would shoot them through the head. If they went for their swords instead, someone would cut them down first. There were other knights with special powers that allowed them to shoot streams of water or flames at the enemy from a greater distance. Every last one of them was so strong and capable, special powers aside. My chest swelled with appreciation.

"Princess Pride, if we enter the building up ahead, we'll have to dismount our horses!" Captain Callum called to me, slashing down an enemy. He and the other knights were making good progress in clearing a path to the castle.

"We could also have Prince Stale take you to headquarters directly," Captain Callum added.

"No, that's all right," I said. "I believe in you. We can keep going and break through to the castle!"

Captain Callum led the way while my knights put their lives on the line to press ever forward. I couldn't possibly take the easy way out and get teleported to the castle. Besides, if Stale and I teleported away, Captain Callum and

Captain Alan would have to leave the battlefield as well, since they were my personal knights. I couldn't pluck such valuable fighters out of the middle of a battle.

"All right! We'll open up a path ourselves!" Captain Alan flashed me a winning smile. "First Squadron, head to the front! Second Squadron, widen out the path!"

Our knights separated into their respective squadrons and raced ahead. The First Squadron took the lead, plunging forward, while the Second Squadron hung back, closer to us. As we approached the castle entrance, the two squadrons jumped off their horses.

Enemy soldiers lunged at the knights, but they would never make it past Captain Alan, leader of the First Squadron. He made quick work of anyone who tried to hinder him. I could hardly believe the speed with which he took out every obstacle obstructing his path. For the first time, I could see for myself why he led his unit. No wonder Arthur always gushed about his strength.

The Second Squadron pushed into the newly formed path and widened it by slaying any foe on either side. By the time we leapt off our horses, there was enough space for two people to traverse side by side. The Second Squadron remained on guard for enemies trying to flank us.

"Princess Pride! Prince Stale! Let's ride straight through!" Captain Callum shouted.

We plunged forward together, still protected by the other knights. At this point, we could enter the castle directly with almost no obstacles left in our way. We charged into the main hall, then wound our way deeper into the castle...until Captain Callum froze before us.

"Alan, take over for me!" he said.

Alan had been in front, but he left that to the other knights of the First Squadron and raced back to us. "Coming!"

He reached us in an instant, probably faster than Arthur.

"Wha—?!" Stale balked, clearly as shocked as me.

It was then that I remembered the battle at the cave, when an unarmored Arthur had been running with me in his arms. He and I had been stupefied by Captain Alan's speed in catching up to us. As far as I remembered, Captain Alan didn't have a special power.

The two captains switched places, and Captain Alan joined me at my side. Captain Callum ran back to the broken door we'd just passed through. Knights and Cercian palace guards desperately repelled enemies attempting to breach the castle. Even though we'd just cleared out these enemies, they were already surging back in.

Captain Callum fell upon these attackers, taking them down before they could overwhelm the castle. He rushed to a large statue next to the door and lifted it with one hand. The man's *one hand* was holding up a statue over three meters tall. It seemed to weigh no more than a feather in his grasp.

"All units, fall back!"

The knights of the order obeyed him instantly, dragging the Cercian guards with them. The swarm of enemies, seeing their opportunity to storm in, rushed at the door as one.

His allies a safe distance away, Captain Callum flung the statue at that door. It struck with a crash, sending enemies flying backward. The bulky statue blocked the door entirely; only frustrated screams were getting past it now. With the enemy stalled, the castle guards and knights swept in to eliminate any hostile troops stuck on our side.

"That should stop them for a while. Let's leave them here and carry on," Captain Callum said.

He urged Stale and me to start running again as he rushed to rejoin us. Honestly, we were still speechless at what we'd just seen. Captain Callum was one of the slimmer knights in the order, and he'd just thrown a statue one-handed—one that should have taken ten knights to lift. His strength was superhuman, literally. He had his special power to thank for it.

When he became an imperial knight, he and Commander Roderick had introduced this power to us, but Stale and I had never personally witnessed it before. We were struggling to process the feat even as the knights around us

shrugged it off, acting like they'd seen this a hundred times before.

Since Captain Callum was back at my side, Captain Alan sprinted ahead. The knights and guards had cleared out almost all of the enemies inside once we'd made it through the door, smoothing the way for our current advance.

"Arthur's selection really *was* perfect," Stale whispered to me.

I nodded. Arthur had told us stories of Captain Alan, Captain Callum, and Vice Captain Eric before they became my imperial knights. Clearly he hadn't been exaggerating when he called these men some of the most capable knights in the order. I couldn't monopolize this kind of power for just myself and steal them away from the rest of the knights fighting so hard back on the battlefield.

"I, Pride Royal Ivy, have arrived with backup!" I announced as I burst into the room serving as the headquarters for Tiara, Prime Minister Gilbert, and Cedric.

Tiara was the first to rush up to us. Prime Minister Gilbert bowed politely and updated me on their situation. After Stale went to speak with a communication specialist, Tiara caught me up on other matters. I then spoke with both Prime Minister Gilbert and King Yohan through the broadcast. I ignored Cedric, who was the only person in that room wearing an expression of pure dread rather than relief.

That look of his did leave me wondering, though. His shoulders slouched. His whole body sagged like he'd given up on life. Even our arrival didn't lift his gloomy eyes from the floor. On top of that, I could have sworn his lustrous golden hair had lost some of its shine.

We decided to assign some of the knights who'd just arrived to this group and make our way to the compromised Cercian castle. Cedric looked as grim as ever, and Tiara and Prime Minister Gilbert only had vague answers for me when I pressed them about it. The war wasn't going poorly at all, but the Cercian prince was caught in some sort of bitter despair.

"Cedric?"

When I approached him, he was still squeezing his fists and glaring at the floor. He seemed to be bracing for something. His gaze flickered up when I called his name, but he flinched away when he finally noticed me. He stepped

backward, so I had to chase him to close the distance again.

“What’s the matter? ” I asked. “Did something happen? Are you nervous? Troubled? Working something out?”

I hoped to nudge Cedric out of his stupor with my questions, but I knew he tried to deal with things on his own. However, even the knights in the room regarded Cedric with concern as he hunched over and flapped his mouth as though he couldn’t decide what to say.

“It’s all right. You know how the war is going, right? All we need to do is hold the front lines and—”

“Why?! Why am I so powerless?!”

He choked the words out with such force that his voice cracked. I was just trying to explain the state of the war in order to comfort him, but here he was blaming himself. I fell silent. Cedric turned his gaze aside and scrunched his face up like he was about to cry. His fists continued to quake at his sides. Whatever this was, it had eaten at him for a long time without my noticing.

I took another step toward him. I got so close our noses could bump together, so close he couldn’t avoid my eyes. He wasn’t alone anymore. I wrapped my hands around his trembling fists, and he finally reopened his eyes.

Cedric went stiff, surprised to see me so close or perhaps frightened by it. His wide eyes flared with bright-red light, a simmering heat that hid whatever Cedric had locked inside. I refused to look away, glaring back at him—at my own reflection in his eyes—and planned my next moves.

“Then let me give you some power,” I said.

His shimmering eyes nearly popped out of his head at that. While he was still trying to untangle my words, I took hold of his shaking fist so I could pull him along.

“Come with me. You’re going to see reality for what it really is.”

With this, I hoped the deeper message would sink in: *“There are things you’re capable of too.”* I told Stale to teleport Captain Callum, Captain Alan, and half the knights we brought with us to my location, then asked him to come up with

a plan to aid the civilians after that. I left Prime Minister Gilbert and Tiara in charge of the room, bid the knights good luck on their mission, and dragged Cedric to the window.

I ordered the guards, who were still firing out the windows, to step aside so I could take their place at the windowsill. I tugged Cedric's hand to pull him up with me, but he planted his feet and refused to follow, legs stiff and eyes wide. He must have thought I was pulling him up so we could leap off together.

A crease formed in his brow. "Pride, what are you—"

"Follow me, Cedric."

I understood his fear, but I couldn't let him run from this. He would regret it even more than I would.

"I'm going to change your world."

Don't worry. I promise this is for the best.

Even as his lips quivered, I prayed that he understood the implication behind my words. I offered a reassuring smile and said, "Watch me." Then I released his hand so I could take the plunge first.

Shouts erupted behind me as I hopped up onto the windowsill, but I knew my imperial knights would follow me wherever I went. Stale would probably teleport and beat them to it.

I shot one last look at Cedric, who gaped at me, speechless. When I turned back to the window and peered at the ground, a swarm of enemy soldiers with bloodshot eyes stared back at me. I leapt out of the window and fell toward them, whereupon they raised their swords and guns. In response, I drew my own blade.

I trusted Cedric was still watching as I landed on the ground and rolled forward. The momentum propelled my body into an arc in the air, and I slashed a path forward. Flowers got caught in my sweeping strike, yellow petals dancing and dispersing in a swirl behind me.

Captain Alan and Captain Callum appeared in the air above me via teleportation. As soon as they hit the ground, they cut down every enemy in my

vicinity. More knights teleported next to me, clearing both my left and right flanks. I left Captain Callum and Captain Alan to guard my back as enemies crumpled around us. I sheathed my sword, confident my knights would protect me.

When I looked up, I caught Cedric still watching me, peering out of the window on the highest floor of the castle. I reached up for him with a smile. Cedric leaned out even farther and adjusted his grip on the windowsill. With a bit more courage, he could make the plunge himself.

“Cedric! Come here!” I called.

The prince responded instantly, kicking off from the window and drifting down to the ground. He landed on his feet, just as I had. The battling knights noticed the prince’s arrival and moved to cover him, although his perfect, daring dive had them stunned, but they recovered quickly.

Cedric cast his eyes downward again when I faced him directly, but at least he didn’t try to run. He looked a bit less pale than before. I grabbed his hand and pulled him toward me.

“It’s all right,” I assured him, smiling.

His head snapped up in surprise when I grabbed his hand. Our eyes locked. I had no intention of demanding he take up a sword and fight; I simply wanted to reward him for trusting me and taking that leap from the window. He’d spent all his life believing he was powerless. If a man who’d never doubted that dire conclusion could jump onto the battlefield at my request...

“Until that time comes, I’ll be sure to protect you,” I said.

Cedric’s blond hair fluttered in the wind. Flames roared to life deep in his eyes. I pulled him forward while he still floundered for words, and my knights defended us as we pressed on. Somewhere along the way, Cedric squeezed my hand.

“We’re going to defend the breached southern wall!” I shouted at my knights.

Although they were busy slaying all the enemies on the ground directly beneath the castle windows, they voiced their agreement with the plan. I joined the battle while Cedric simply watched it all in a daze, his sword still sheathed at

his hip.

“Just watch me and the knights!” I told him.

I had to balance protecting him and fighting, but my knights were there to help. Cedric gaped at the rest of us as we mowed down the enemies in our path. I had to release his hand during all this, but he hurried to keep up with us.

In the original game, Cedric only became a wonderful prince after the war ended, but that change had to arrive in its own time. Plus, as an important political ally of Freesia, he didn’t need to personally participate in the battle. No one would blame a member of royalty for simply waiting out the war inside the castle—especially a major target like Cedric, who was next in line to the throne after King Lance.

But Cedric wanted to change, and he wanted to change *now*. If I were in his position, and someone told me that I would become a wonderful prince in a year’s time, I would still curse my inability to fight for my family and country now. I would want a chance to change myself, even if it came with some risk. That was why I’d dragged him onto this battlefield rather than leaving him behind.

“You aren’t powerless, Cedric!” I told him.

I followed the castle wall, cutting down anyone in our path. Cedric followed close behind me as I urged him along. A soldier tried to lunge at me from the side, but Captain Callum took him down.

“How can you say that?! I don’t have a single accomplishment to my name!” Cedric said, his tone high with desperation.

He tried to stop in the midst of the battle, and our enemies immediately seized on the opportunity. I had to yank him forward to avoid danger, and Captain Alan swept in to protect us. Other members of the First Squadron carved out a path for us.

“You’re the one who called us here! You persuaded King Yohan to accept our help, didn’t you?!” I said.

I squeezed the hand I still held. Cedric stumbled in his bewilderment and I had to pull him again, but an enemy lurking in the shadows noticed it and leapt for

Cedric. I flung myself in front of the prince, narrowly parrying the enemy attack and stabbing the man through the chest.

“If you hadn’t been foolish and reckless enough to ask for our help, Freesia and Anemone never would have set foot in this land!”

A soldier scaling the castle wall aimed his gun at us. Before he could pull the trigger, I drew my own gun in a blink and fired at his hands. Cedric’s eyes went round, startled by my sudden shot.

“You don’t need power! You don’t need to rely on talent! Be proud of the fact that you chose to put up a fight!”

An enemy clinging to the castle wall jumped down when he spotted us. I stuffed my gun in its holster and tightened my grip on my sword, plunging it into the man as he fell. The weight of the enemy’s body threatened to drag me to the ground. It was Cedric who grabbed my shoulder and pulled me back to steady me.

“Erm, sorry, I didn’t mean to,” he stammered after touching me so abruptly. I yanked my sword out of the man’s body and faced Cedric with a smile.

“It’s fine. You can touch me in times like these. Thank you, Cedric.”

It was time to press onward, but Cedric was still blinking with surprise at my response. I had to haul him yet again.

“Don’t you...think I’m pathetic?” he asked eventually. “I can only ever follow other people.”

“You mean because you’re stubborn, emotional, and only confident in your looks?!” I resisted the urge to call him *cocky*. In lieu of a response, he squeezed my hand tight.

One soldier at our feet was still breathing. He reached out to grab Cedric’s jacket, so I kicked him away. The man clasped my leg next. I shook free and plunged my sword into the foe.

“What I’m trying to say is that I don’t think you’re pathetic!”

I snatched Cedric’s wrist and pulled him once more as I shouted. The knights had done a good job clearing our path, but the enemies were still pouring in

from all directions. I put a swift end to them with my sword, my firearm, and the rest of the knights in order.

“You should never stop asking me for help!” I shouted during a skirmish. “If you reach out to me to save someone, then I’ll always grab your hand in return! That’s the whole reason—”

The knights reported that more enemies were coming. I whirled and found additional enemy soldiers in hot pursuit. My knights scooped guns off the fallen, and I grabbed two myself. I sheathed my sword and readied them both.

As I sprang upward, guns at the ready, I called down to Cedric, “That’s the whole reason...that we met in the first place!”

I fired in midair, striking an enemy in both hands. Bullets cracked and blood sprayed into the air. I landed on the ground and discarded the depleted firearms, then took Cedric’s hand once more so we could keep moving.

“It’s all right. I know you can do it,” I murmured, making sure we were in the clear.

The knights took care of the rest of the attackers at our backs. Captain Callum aided the troops at our flanks, while Captain Alan took charge of carving out a path in front of us. We kept the enemies at bay, pushing onward until the broken castle wall to the south lay in sight. Once we reached it, we could hold the line and repel the incursion.

The closer we got, the more enemy soldiers started to swarm us. Our allied troops were fighting tooth and nail to keep them subdued, so I ordered my knights to provide support. The First and Second Squadrons, who’d been positioned in front of us, raced to our allied soldiers.

Captain Alan tried to regroup with me, but I smiled and yelled back, “No, I’m all right! Please go open the path with your unit!” Captain Callum issued commands to the Third and Fourth Squadrons. Soon, they’d all tightened up around the prince and me to boost our protection.

“Have you been studying, Cedric?” I asked while we watched Captain Alan lead the knights forward.

After a moment to process my sudden question, Cedric nodded. “I have... I’ve

been doing it just like you asked.” He lacked his usual swagger, sounding much more hesitant.

“Good,” I replied. I’d told him to study up before we returned to Cercis with our knights, since I felt that it would be necessary for him. “Tell me, then. How do you think the war is going at the moment?”

“Well, it all comes down to the front lines in the north. I think that’s where Copelandii’s headquarters and generals must be. The reports from the knights make it sound like enemy firepower is really concentrated there, and the fact that they’re not forcing an attack out here despite reorganizing is proof of that. They can’t fight back against us here because they have to concentrate on holding the line in the north.”

Cedric went on to explain that—now that our opposition had sacrificed their slaves to the bombing attack—all they had left was their main forces, so they wouldn’t want to risk any more perilous strategies. I agreed with his analysis; it was the same conclusion Prime Minister Gilbert, King Yohan, and I had also reached.

“What else?” I prompted.

The prince rattled off all sorts of maneuvers and strategies based off the math of the war. Most of his conclusions likewise matched what the prime minister and I had determined, but he occasionally added his own unique perspective on potential enemy actions like setting traps and causing distractions. He even listed possible missteps that Copelandii might make. He must have been reading a lot in the time we were apart. The more he spoke, the more I stood in awe of him and lost track of the battle raging around us.

“All right, that’s plenty,” I said at last. I’d stopped him mid-sentence even though it was clear he had much more to share.

“That just leaves the bombs from those invisible blimps. If you measure the time and distance, they had to come from Copelandii, since they’re closest to us here in—”

“W-w-wait a minute!” I croaked.

Captain Callum and the other knights turned at my panicked cry, eyeing me

with alarm. Cedric blinked rapidly, his mouth hanging open.

“Did you say ‘invisible blimps’?” I asked.

He must have been referring to the mysterious bombings on the northern front. I tugged Cedric toward me and looked up at him. His face stiffened as he attempted to process my reaction. Before I could press him further, he flinched and turned his eyes to the sky as if coming to some rapid realization. I followed his gaze and couldn’t believe what I saw.

“Incoming!”

“Enemy bombs are dropping! All units, prepare to—”

A hail of bombs dropped from the sky.

“Eep!”

Ka-boom! Ka-boom! Ka-boom!

“It’s a bombing! Please step away from the window, Prime Minister!”

Someone grabbed me by the arm as thunder rocked the entire castle. Princess Tiara shrieked again and clamped her hands over her ears. Knights leapt in to protect her head while others gathered protectively around me, peering out the window.

“It can’t be! The bombings have started up in Cercis now?!” King Yohan yelled through the transmission.

“Yes,” I replied. “But the bombs we’re experiencing here aren’t as big. I believe they’re different from the others we’ve seen.”

I had to shout over the sound of explosions, but these bombs definitely seemed smaller than the ones that had exploded on the northern front. They must have run out of the larger ones—a blessing in disguise, as we’d never have survived a full-scale bombing. Now they directed minor explosives at the far softer target of the Cercian castle. This structure was easier to destroy than the Chinensian castle, which was attached to a large church.

The strategy makes sense, but...how did they do this?

I squinted out the window, but I couldn't make out anything useful. Our lookouts also struggled to determine the source of the bombs. Had the enemy hurled them at us from afar, hidden the blimps in the clouds or sunlight, or used some new kind of aerial vehicle? I had nothing but guesses to go off of.

The explosions quieted, leaving a sweeping silence in their wake. Debris from the ceiling littered the floor, but it was the only damage I could find. Although our knights seemed unharmed, I needed to discern the status of the Cercian troops.

Princess Tiara was ringed by knights. She cradled her head and faced the ground, trembling with fear. Still, neither she nor anyone else was injured, and for that I could only be thankful. Prince Stale had already teleported away to deal with other matters, so he was out of harm's way as well.

I gasped, realizing I'd forgotten someone. "Princess Pride!"

She had jumped out of the castle window earlier. Was she safe? She and her imperial knights had made a mad dash for the castle's southern wall. If any of the bombs actually injured her...

I went stiff, a chill running down my spine. I shook my mind clear of the sudden fog of raw fear, telling myself it would take more than those bombs to harm our princess.

Doing my best to reassure myself, I asked the guards about the state of the castle. My thoughts kept drifting back to Princess Pride nonetheless. This was hardly the first time I'd found myself fretting over the princess's safety. Two years ago, she'd led an attack on a human trafficking ring, and we'd faced a similar barrage of bombs. Though we never identified the source of the blasts, the incident stuck out in my mind. Could they be linked somehow?

"No! It can't be!"

Princess Tiara's shout broke through my musing. Knights were staring at her, seeking some source of distress. I rushed to her side. She stared fixedly at the ground, cradling her head and shuddering in terror. Her face had gone white as a sheet. Try as I might to meet her eyes, she wouldn't look at me.

"Princess Tiara? Are you all right? Can you hear me?" I asked her.

Was she in shock? I tried touching her shoulder and she snatched my hand, squeezing it tight. I froze as the teary-eyed girl raised her head to look at me. “Prime Minister Gilbert,” she whispered, her lips trembling.

Dread crept over me. My heart leapt into my throat.

“You have to evacuate the southern wing of the castle at once! Any minute now...it’s going to collapse!”

Stunned silence followed Princess Tiara’s pronouncement. The southern wing had been hit in the recent bombings and penetrated by enemy forces. Even here, at headquarters, cracks sprawled across the crumbling ceiling. I couldn’t dismiss the possibility of a collapse.

But how could Princess Tiara possibly know that?

“Are you hurt, Princess Pride?” Captain Callum asked me.

“Forgive us for acting so late!” Captain Alan said.

The aftershocks had finally died down. The ringing in my ears quieted. Captain Callum had raced over to protect Cedric and me the second we warned them of the incoming bombs. Captain Alan had sprinted back to the front lines to join Captain Callum in shielding us.

“No, it’s all right,” I said. “Thank you both. Are either of you injured?”

The smoke from the blast was still obscuring my vision. I squinted, searching for my captains among the haze. Gusts stirred by the explosion continued to blow past us. All the lovely yellow flowers had burned and withered in the blast. Still, I’d braced for a much more powerful explosion than this. Indeed, as I scanned the battlefield, I found a few of our enemies injured, but none of my knights.

“Pride! Let me...go!”

I blinked, realizing the muffled voice had come from Cedric. I had grabbed his head with my arms instinctively and shielded the upper half of his body, but it appeared that this position made it difficult for him to breathe. The problem had been exacerbated by Captain Callum pulling us toward him and Captain

Alan pressing his body against us protectively, leaving Cedric crushed between everyone else.

“I’m sorry,” I said, releasing my grip.

Cedric jerked away and straightened up. He looked like he wanted to speak, but he ended up choking on the dust kicked up by the explosion instead.

“Why the hell are you shielding me?!” he finally asked. “Aren’t I...supposed to be the protector here?!” He continued to cough as he stared me down.

I smiled awkwardly. Even through the dusty haze, Cedric’s eyes burned clear as day. As a prince, he was probably embarrassed to have been rescued by a woman. I gave him a little space before speaking again.

“We made a promise,” I said simply.

At that, Cedric pressed his lips together, his fiery gaze wavering. He may have wanted to respond, but he squeezed his hands into fists like he was holding himself back.

“Your Highnesses! Be careful!” Captain Alan shouted.

Sucking in a breath, I spun to find enemy soldiers climbing back onto their feet and charging us as a group. My knights swept in to intercept them, dodging their clumsy attacks. I grabbed Cedric’s hand again. “Don’t move unless you have to,” I said, readying myself to defend this spot if necessary.

No enemies could reach us with the knights at our side. I squinted, trying to make out my knights’ efforts through the grimy air. Then Cedric pulled me toward him. He was fixated on a point in the distance, what seemed like a mere shadow among the dust.

“Wait, Cedric! That’s one of your soldiers!”

The soldier sat collapsed against a castle wall. He wore the uniform of the Cercian soldiers.

“It sure is!” Cedric cried. The man had to be a guard here to defend the two of us, but it looked like the blast had knocked him unconscious. Cedric peeled away from my side and ran to him. “Hey! Byron!”

“Hold on, Cedric! You can’t move yet!”

It was still way too easy for enemies to sneak up on us through the dust. If we moved, my imperial knights could lose track of us. I grabbed Cedric's arm with both hands to keep him still. He struggled in my grip, then clenched his teeth and gave up.

I assumed the other guards had managed to avoid the blast altogether or were shielded by the knights. As far as I could see, this one guard was the only victim on our side.

"Wait until the smoke clears, at the very least," I said. "Do you know that man?"

"No, I've never talked to him, but he's one of Bro's guards. We can't just leave him here!"

Cedric never tore his eyes from the fallen guard. I felt like he would run again if I released my grip on his arm even a little.

"Urgent! Urgent! The southern wing is at risk of collapsing! All units nearby are ordered to evacuate immediately!" a messenger shouted through the din.

The man was one of our knights who'd been stationed inside at headquarters. He must have possessed a special power that gave him extra speed, or he'd jumped from the second floor of the castle to deliver this urgent message. The southern building lay directly in front of us. Was it really going to collapse? I peered up at it, searching for fault lines.

Crack-crack... Snap! Rrrumble...

The roar of enemy soldiers and clamor of battle had masked those ominous noises until now. Cedric stumbled backward, evidently having heard them too. Before we could figure out what to do next, Captain Callum raised his voice.

"All units, fall back! Get away from the area as fast as you can!"

The knights made a break from the enemy and took off running. Captain Callum snatched my arm and gave Cedric's back a shove to lead us away.

This is really bad!

Cedric was trying to wriggle free from me so he could go to the fallen guard.

I knew he would try that! Of course he would! I gripped him harder to keep

him from escaping.

“Captain Callum, I order you to restrain Cedric!” I yelled in desperation. The captain instantly grabbed him.

“Let go of me!”

I moved in front of Cedric, released him, and sent myself flying backward. I used the momentum to run for the collapsed guard.

Captain Callum and Cedric called out behind me. The urgency in their voices discouraged me from looking up, and a shudder rippled through my body. I even chucked aside my sword so I could sprint faster.

The guard, Byron, was slumped in a shadow cast by the castle wall. Between that and all the smoke, I could barely make him out. Once I reached him, I tried to pull him up by the arm, but I sensed someone approaching from behind. I didn’t need to turn to know who it was. I instantly offered Byron to the man behind me, knowing he’d fare far better than me at lifting the guard.

“Captain Alan, take this man!” I said.

The captain had caught up to me with incredible speed. “I’ll handle him. Just run!” he shouted at me, desperation etched onto his face. He lifted the guard with one arm and used his free hand to push me back toward safety.

After a few steps, I checked over my shoulder and saw Captain Alan carrying Byron on his back through the dust. Just as I turned to continue running, something caught my left foot. I desperately attempted to free it, but my right foot slipped, sending me hurtling to the ground.

“Augh!”

A horrible *crunch* resonated through my body, followed by searing pain.

“Princess Pride?!” Captain Alan called, although his voice came from way ahead.

Thank goodness... He kept going.

We couldn’t see each other well due to the dust cloud, so I simply yelled back, “I’m all right! Please get that guard to safety!”

I turned my attention back to my foot to find an enemy soldier clutching it. He lay on his belly, severely injured but grinning through the pain of his last rasps. He'd taken the opportunity in his last moments to drag me down.

Fear stole my breath away. I turned my eyes upward to put my captor out of my mind, but that only showed me the top portion of the tower, where large fissures snaked through the stone. It swayed on the verge of total collapse, large chunks already plummeting to the ground.

By the time I looked back at the enemy soldier to demand he release me, his armored hand had gone limp. He was dead, yet I couldn't free myself from his grip. Panicked, I kicked repeatedly, scrambling for any chance at escape.

Large chunks of rubble began to rain down from the castle—some as small as the palm of my hand, others even larger than the enemy soldier's hand, armor and all.

Oh no, oh no, oh no!

As I reached out to remove the enemy's hand...

Crack!

A thirty-centimeter hunk of rubble fell directly on my left leg. Something audibly snapped, and my mind went blank from the pain.

It's broken, it's broken, it's broken! This is bad, this is bad, this is so bad!

I couldn't do anything but scream inside my own head. I writhed in pain, helpless on the ground. The whole tower was tilting to one side now.

It sure looks like the bomb took it out.

That thought arrived strangely detached, as though it belonged to someone else. Or perhaps I'd simply made peace with my inevitable demise.

"Princess!"

"She's here!"

The cries of my imperial knights reached me through the panic. *Oh no.*

Terror beat back my desire to call for help. "Stay back!" I yelled, but the two figures in the distance only ran toward me faster.

I'd resigned myself to death, but this snapped me out of it. *They won't make it out in time!* At this rate, Captain Callum and Captain Alan were just going to get crushed with me. Captain Callum's special power allowed him to lift immense weight, but I didn't know if he could sustain an impact from falling objects. They couldn't just swat aside the rubble either. Captain Alan was fast, but not as much as those with speed-related special powers. He could never carry Captain Callum and me to safety in time!

"Princess Pride!"

As rubble rained down on me, it was indeed Captain Alan who arrived first. He ripped away the enemy soldier's hand from my foot and the rubble from my leg. Right as he lifted me into his arms, a two-meter hunk of debris crashed down on top of us.

Captain Alan put his back to it, trying to shield me while he ran. Then Captain Callum rushed up and stopped the rubble with his special power. The sudden impact slammed him downward, but he managed to stand his ground, catch the rubble, and hurl it away.

As he did so, Captain Alan took off running. The castle shifted in the distance, ready to fall. I put my fingers in my mouth to whistle for Stale, but I couldn't get the sound to come out right. I tried it over and over again before realizing I was still wearing my gloves. *I can't believe how scrambled my brain is right now.*

Captain Alan followed my gaze over his shoulder. He sped up when he saw the castle tottering, but Captain Callum cried out for him. Captain Alan gnashed his teeth loudly and pushed even harder toward his fellow captain. He kicked off the ground and landed with one foot on Captain Callum's raised palm. With his special power of superhuman strength, Captain Callum easily lifted the two of us up...and sent us flying.

The combination of Captain Alan's strong legs and Captain Callum's physical strength propelled me toward safety. A breeze rushed past us as we sailed away from the castle like a rocket. I squeezed my eyes shut and held on tight. The world spun and jerked all around me. Captain Alan must have flipped in the air before landing perfectly with me still in his arms.

It all happened so fast I couldn't even process it. Behind us, the southern wing

of the castle started to implode.

What about Captain Callum?!

“Huh? C-Captain Callum?!”

My voice came out before I could comprehend the situation. I squeezed Captain Alan’s shirt and peered up at him with wide eyes. He was gritting his teeth and glaring back toward the castle. An icy chill ran through me from head to toe.

“H-hurry! Save him!”

I kicked as though I could jump to the ground and go back for Captain Callum, but the motion sent pain stabbing through my legs. *Captain Callum... He’s still under that rubble!*

I shouted the captain’s name over and over as tears spilled down my cheeks. I struggled in Captain Alan’s arms, demanding we go back, but he refused to let me out of his trembling arms. I tried to whistle for Stale, but it wasn’t possible with my gloves on, and my hands were shaking too bad to get them off.

“Captain Callum! Come on, we have to save him! Now, Captain Alan! Save Captain Callum! Save Captain Ca—”

“Who the hell do you think you are, makin’ her cry?!”

A familiar voice interrupted me at the same moment a trail of smoke streaked by. I stopped screaming abruptly to follow the trail, which had come straight from the castle. *It can’t be!*

I recognized that voice.

“Val?!”

“I don’t think...I can take this much weight...”

I wasn’t talking to anyone in particular—just gritting my teeth as hard as my jaw would let me. I dodged all the falling rubble after throwing Alan and Princess Pride out of harm’s way. When a piece was too big to evade, I caught it with my special power. But another chunk of rock landed on that one, then

another, piling up higher and higher in my hands.

If I tried to throw any rubble off to the side, the mountain in my hands would collapse, swallowing me in an avalanche of debris. I could either throw them all at once and make a break for it or try to hold on until the castle finished falling. Both options left me with a slim chance of survival.

There was only rubble on the ground and not people. I wondered if anyone had been on the upper floors of the castle when it collapsed, if our headquarters was still safe, if Princess Tiara, Prime Minister Gilbert, Prince Stale, and the knights and soldiers had escaped unharmed. Had Princess Pride and Alan made it out all right? Was the battle at the northern front progressing well? Even as the stone grew heavier in my arms, I couldn't help thinking about all the people I might leave behind when the castle crushed me.

Did Commander Roderick feel the same way six years ago?

At least we didn't have enemies actively pursuing us like we did back then. And Princess Pride would get out of this. That was the good news.

The knights of the Third Squadron were all excellent men. Princess Pride also had Alan, Eric, and Arthur as her imperial knights. They would get the job done without me. If I regretted anything, it would be forcing Alan to make the decision to leave me behind here. That and whatever anguish Princess Pride would likely suffer over my death.

"Hey, asshole."

A voice came from somewhere in the rubble. I raised my head, worried someone hadn't managed to escape. It dawned on me then that I knew who'd spoken—but that man had no business being in this country right now.

"You're Val! Why are you here?!"

I couldn't contain my shock that the villainous-looking man with the dark brown eyes and hair was actually here right now. When he smiled, he flashed his pointy teeth. His brown skin was unusual for a Freesian as well. This man was part of the group who'd ambushed Commander Roderick six years ago. Under Freesian law, he had been punished by entering into a fealty contract and now worked as a "deliveryman" for Princess Pride.

He must have appeared in the short amount of time I let my head droop. Children stood to either side of him: one boy and one girl. The brown-haired girl had long hair and grown-out bangs, while the boy was small and had messy black hair. Their names were Sefekh and Khemet, as I recalled. The two of them had their arms wrapped around Val's waist and peered past him to look at me.

It all clicked right then. *Val's special power...*

The heap of rubble I'd been holding up with both hands was far steadier than before; it didn't wobble or shake in the slightest. It seemed so light, in fact, that if I took my hands away it might float overhead.

When I turned my gaze back to Val, I found him glaring at me with those fierce eyes of his, face twitching. Waves of irritation washed off him. He lifted one foot.

"Go to hell for makin' my mistress cry!" he snarled, lips twisted in rage.

Slam!

Val stomped his foot down and reached his hand out. As soon as he touched a piece of the rubble I was balancing, the entire stack drifted up out of my hands. Val swiped his hand to the side, sending the pile flying off into the distance.

It took me a moment to realize he'd just saved me, especially because Val was still clicking his tongue and glaring at me. He strolled toward the collapsing castle. I briefly thought of stopping him, but he approached the danger with such nonchalance that I didn't think he really needed my help.

"Why the hell..."

Stone showered down from above as Val muttered to himself. Before any of it could pulverize my head, the ground rose up, forming a protective dome around me.

"...do I..."

Everything falling toward Val struck a large coiling snake made of sand. The sand snake flicked away the pieces of rubble. When larger chunks hurtled toward Val, he cocooned himself in an orb of dirt like the one he'd constructed around me.

“...have to save...”

Val burst out of the cocoon and walked up to the base of the collapsing towers. His anger burned more intensely with each step. He staggered up to the castle wall and set his hand against it.

“...a damn knight of all people?!”

He shouted his frustration at the wobbling structure coming down all around him. The highest floors were just about to topple.

“Damn it aaaaaalllll!”

Val let out a tremendous war cry, and the entire collapse simply...stopped.

The upper floors straightened back out like soldiers standing at attention. It was like he'd forced the scattered pieces of the castle back into place. The shape was warped but stable. Debris floated upward and returned to its place within the structure. He even rearranged nearby rubble on the ground to serve as supports.

Though the building stood crooked and imperfect compared to before, the halt and reversal of the collapse was like a miracle.

As I stood there, speechless, Val turned to glare at me again from a distance. He took his hand off the castle wall and stomped over to me. As soon as he was close enough, he reached for the collar of my shirt...and froze unnaturally.

What's the matter with him?

Val clicked his tongue, irritated, then grabbed me by the arm. He was glaring at me again with that same venom.

“I'm gonna carry you for now. 'Kay?”

His rumbling voice made it sound more like a threat than an offer of help. It had to be the fealty contract. The agreement he'd signed with Princess Pride forbade him from harming others. Similarly, he couldn't drag me or anyone else away without permission. I granted it to him right away. Before I could even thank him, the ground rumbled beneath my feet.

The earth rose up unnaturally once more. It swallowed up Val, Sefekh, and Khemet's legs as it swelled. The children grabbed onto Val's torso again, while

Val himself reached out and took me by the arm.

“Bite your tongue,” Val said. “Don’t want you to die on me.”

Before I could ask what he meant, the ground beneath us sped up.

“Huh?!”

This was like the time Val had used his special power to get our carriage home from a confidential trip to a foreign land. That carriage had moved unbelievably quickly, at least until Princess Pride ordered Val to stop propelling us forward. That had to be what was happening now too.

I dug my heels into the ground and squeezed Val’s arm. Thanks to the superhuman strength my special power provided, I managed to avoid getting shaken off, but the speed and force of this mode of travel was more than enough to send an ordinary person flying. My eyes couldn’t even keep up with the scenery whizzing past. I gritted my teeth against the whirl of the world zipping by. We had to be going at least five times faster than even the vanguard was capable of.



Just as abruptly, we screeched to a halt. The sudden stop bucked me away from Val in a violent lurch. I stumbled forward, unable to absorb the momentum. My grip relaxed, and Val flung me off his arm. I flew through the air, barely catching myself in time to land on my feet. That was when I finally figured out what was happening.

“Captain Callum!”

“Callum!”

As soon as I saw Princess Pride in Alan’s arms, I noticed the tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. She reached out to me, and I understood everything.

“Captain Callum!”

“Callum!”

Captain Alan and I cried out at the same time. Captain Callum landed perfectly on the ground and slumped down into a sitting position. Captain Alan, still carrying me, crouched so I could look at him.

“Your Highness,” he murmured.

I reached my arms out, wrapped them around the back of his neck, and pulled him close. I only caught a glimpse of his widening eyes as I wrapped him in a hug.

“Thank goodness!” I said with a sigh.

I’d truly believed that Captain Callum had sacrificed his life to save me. I felt guilty for putting the two captains in danger with my own selfish actions, but my joy at Captain Callum’s safety was much greater. My eyes stung with unshed tears.

“I’m so sorry. Thank you so much.” I repeated those words over and over again.

“It’s all right,” he told me.

“We were only doing our jobs,” Captain Alan said.

“I’m sorry for frightening you,” Captain Callum added, bowing his head in

apology once I released him from the hug.

For a moment, I didn't understand. Then I realized my own teary-eyed relief must have been making *him* feel guilty. I wiped my eyes and smiled at him. He was truly a kind person, even in moments like these.

Captain Alan was just about to set me down again when...

"Please wait!"

I shrieked and desperately wrapped my arms around the captain's neck. Captain Alan froze and adjusted his hold on me, and both men eyed me with confusion. This was bad.

"Um, it's just..." I stammered, avoiding their eyes.

"Don't tell me..." Captain Alan responded immediately; he'd seen right through me. "Callum! Look at Her Highness's left leg!"

Captain Alan had seen my leg get trapped under the rubble when he saved me.

"Ah, no, it's not a big deal," I mumbled, but Captain Callum was already asking permission to approach. He started to remove the armor around my leg. Even Val was scowling at me, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Cool air brushed against my leg once Captain Callum got the armor off. Removing the pressure of the armor brought the pain—which I'd forgotten about upon reuniting with Captain Callum—surging back to the forefront.

Captain Alan gulped at the sight of the red, swollen flesh.

Captain Callum touched it gently. "This is bad. She needs to be seen by someone with healing powers. Prince Cedric should be nearby with the other knights. The Seventh Squadron is around as well."

"I'll find them!" Captain Alan said, then gently handed me over to Captain Callum before darting off with impressive speed.

What should I do? The pain's getting worse now that I have nothing else to focus on, and it's not just my left leg anymore.

I clenched my teeth against the waves of agony washing over me. How in the

world had I been kicking when Captain Alan scooped me up earlier?

“A knight will be here soon,” Captain Callum said, setting me down on the ground.

I managed to nod in response.

“Damn it, Mistress!” Val said. “Call for your four-eyed prince already! He can take you to Freesia or anywhere you want, right?!”

“Mistress?!” Sefekh squeaked.

“Are you all right?!” Khemet asked me.

Val was right. Stale could take me somewhere safe if I called for him—including, say, a doctor in Freesia. Yet I didn’t dare follow through with it.

“No. I can’t...leave this place...” I managed.

We were in the middle of a war. I was here in Cercis as the queen’s proxy; running home because of an injury wasn’t possible. King Lance, King Yohan, all of their people and soldiers, my knights, and even Stale were still fighting!

Val balked. “What the hell are you talkin’ about?!”

“Lower your voice!” Callum snapped. “The princess is injured!”

I shook my head at Val. “It’s not...life-threatening. I can stay on the battlefield, even if my legs don’t work! I can’t be...the only person to run away...”

I squeezed my uniform sleeves as I made my case. Stale would drag me back to Freesia against my will the second he saw me in this state. An injured princess was just a burden on everyone else. Plus, Mother had made Stale promise to look after me when she entrusted me with the war.

But I couldn’t just run away over one lousy leg injury!

“It’s all right,” I said. “I’ll be better soon. Right now, we have to secure the southern border, as well as the village.”

That was as far as I got before something hit me. Captain Callum asked what was wrong, why I’d suddenly gone silent, but I couldn’t stop gaping at Val.

“Val, why are you here?” I asked without thinking, although it was probably a bit late for that.

Val's eyes went round in surprise. After that uncertain pause, he said, "The prince called me here. He wanted me to help out the townsfolk in the village and the knights on the northern front. Not that I give a damn about that."

I gaped at him. *So it was Stale's doing!* I didn't know where he was right now, but he must have acted as soon as he heard me say I wanted to save the townsfolk.

"Promise me that you'll rely on us next time, whether you need us or not."

Stale's words from a year ago beat back the pain rising in my mind. Indeed, I'd promised I would rely on him. When had Stale ever disobeyed my wishes and taken matters into his own hands?

Tears burned behind my eyes once more.

Captain Callum, startled by the sight, said, "What's the matter?!"

Val staggered back a step, gawking.

"I'm all right," I said, rubbing my eyes. "Val, please do exactly what Stale requested of you, if you can."

My leg still ached, but at least I could speak clearly now.

Val furrowed his brow and scowled. I understood that he wasn't a knight or a soldier. Both Stale and I were asking him to take on something well outside of his delivery duties. That was why I'd decided to phrase it as a request he could deny instead of an order.

"You want me to leave you and go clean up after a bunch of guys I don't even know?" Val growled out, grimacing. He stared at me like there was more he wanted to add to that. I swallowed upon hearing the thinly veiled anger in his voice.

"That's right. I believe you can do it, which is why I'm asking for your help."

When I told him my wishes, Val's expression changed to shock. His eyes were locked on me, but he didn't speak.

"I'll call for Stale too," I said. "I promise. But with my leg as bad as it is...I can't go anywhere."

The conversation distracted me from my pain, but I was still suffering. I'd have no luck standing on my own. I breathed, hoping to stay calm even as sweat dripped down my forehead. The reassuring smile I'd attempted merely wavered on my lips.

"Please. If even a single soul can be saved, then that is my wish. But don't do anything dangerous. That's my only order for you."

I knew my words carried little gravity with me sprawled out in the dirt. But once I finally used the word "order," Val hung his head and pressed a hand to it. He groaned, the rumbling sound seeming to rise from the earth beneath our feet. Either he was fighting the order or he was bored out of his mind.

"And here I thought you were leaving me as a watchdog in Freesia for five days," Val muttered.

Captain Callum's eyes widened at the mention of Freesia. I sat up too. Had the formal talks with Rajah already begun?

"What happened in Freesia?" I pressed, but Val just told me it had nothing to do with the royal family. I next asked if it was something to do with the Freesian civilians, but he said they were fine too. Val couldn't lie to me under his fealty contract, so that news had to be accurate.

Pain shot through my leg from my efforts to sit up straighter. My hair fell loose around me, a few wayward strands sticking to my face.

Val sighed at the sight. "If you miss Freesia so much, just go home already."

He crouched to look me in the eyes. His gaze was still sharp, but I didn't sense the anger from before. He brushed my bangs off my damp forehead, tucking the strands into place behind my ear.

"Freesia's boring when you're not around," he said.

My heart skipped a beat at the sorrowful look in his eyes. He was telling me I belonged in Freesia.

Val pulled his hand back and stood. He called for Khemet and Sefekh and started to walk away without another word. I didn't know what Val had planned or where he was going, but I had more to say to him.

“Please, wait!”

Val turned at my call, his face twitching with irritation. I reached up for him like a child and said, “Please, just one more thing.”

He returned with a sigh and dropped to one knee before me. With gratitude swelling in my chest, I reached for Val, pulling him into a one-armed hug with all the strength I could muster. The awkward position left my leg aching, but I wasn’t about to let go that easily.

“What?!” Val cried.

But I pulled him even closer. He lost his balance and fell into me, so I lowered my hand to his back.

“Thank you for saving Captain Callum.”

That was the one thing I wanted to say to him. Whatever Val did next, even if something did happen to me, I needed him to know how grateful I was for what he’d done. I’d never ordered Val to save Captain Callum.

Val didn’t think much of the royal family or our knights, yet he’d saved one of them anyway. I wished I could have thanked him properly with a grand curtsy of esteem, but this was the best I could do right now.

I squeezed my arm tighter, trying to convey my gratitude. Val simply held still and quiet. I started to relax my grip, worried I was choking him, when...

“Princess Pride, I’ve brought knights from the Seventh Squadron!” Captain Alan called out from a distance.

At the cry, Val clicked his tongue. I pulled back to peer up at him and found a piercing glimmer in his eyes. He turned that razor-sharp gaze on Captain Alan.

Before I could ask what was wrong, Val said, “Mistress, we’re standin’ up now.”

Not giving me time to process, he wrapped his arms around me and scooped me up off the ground. I squeaked from the sudden change, and Val glanced down at me.

“I’m only doin’ this kinda thing once in a billion years.”

He clicked his tongue again as he mumbled to himself. I looked up at him and cocked my head. What in the world did he mean by that?

“Forget it,” Val said.

Ignoring my probing look, he handed me over to Captain Alan, who’d run up to meet us. Behind the captain, Cedric and a few knights lingered. *Shoot. I need to apologize to Cedric too.*

Val scowled at the arrival of even more knights and finally turned to leave for good. Khemet and Sefekh grabbed hold of him and waved goodbye to me.

“See you later, Mistress!” Khemet said.

“Be sure to rest up!” Sefekh said.

With that, Val used his special power to lift the ground beneath their feet and hurl them forward. They raced off into the distance. I sent my silent thanks after Val as I watched him shrink away.

Somehow, I felt like everything would be all right.

“Captain Alan, please hold Princess Pride in that exact position!” a member of the Seventh Squadron barked at me.

I held still while he treated the suffering princess cradled in my arms. I wished I could do more than just stand there and hold her. Rage and helplessness burned in my chest. I’d failed to protect her. There was no bigger blunder for an imperial knight than this. If only I’d stayed at her side, this never would have happened. Even Callum came so close to...

No! Get it together, Alan.

The shame crawled up my throat when I took in the sight of Princess Pride’s bare leg, which was obviously causing her a lot of pain. All the knights of the Seventh Squadron eyed the damage warily. I tried my best not to infect them with my impatience in the hopes that they wouldn’t be as distracted by it as I was.

“Your Highness, is it only your left leg that hurts?” Callum asked her.

Four members of the Seventh Squadron—knights who specialized in first aid and medical treatment—were treating the wound with their special powers, as requested by Callum. Judging by the gruesome angle of Princess Pride’s leg, it was broken. The slender limb had swollen up significantly, but the treatment was already starting to reduce the redness. That did little for the pain, unfortunately. Princess Pride paused for a moment when she heard Callum’s question before hesitantly opening her mouth.

“Sorry... I think I twisted my right leg too...”

My vision went dark. I squeezed her tighter in my arms to try to stop my body from shaking. A cold sweat dripped down my cheeks, one that I couldn’t wipe away, while Callum worked on removing the armor on her right leg.

Both legs. Princess Pride couldn’t even stand on her own right now. Even if our medics’ treatment could reduce the pain, healing her would take time. She wouldn’t be able to walk on her own any time soon.

When the armor came off, it revealed the swollen joint in her right leg. It didn’t look broken, like her left leg, but it was red and inflamed compared to the pale skin of the leg already receiving treatment. The Seventh Squadron member actively examining her called for additional assistance.

“Cedric...” Princess Pride called hoarsely.

The knights opened a path so Cedric could approach. He must have followed the Seventh Squadron evacuees when I went to them for help. Prince Cedric took heavy, slow steps between the knights. He wore an expression I recognized all too well; he was blaming himself for this whole disaster. But the real culprit was me...and Callum too. We’d been negligent in our duties as Princess Pride’s imperial knights.

The prince’s legs trembled as he stepped beside Callum. He stumbled back when he got a good look at Princess Pride’s injuries. Even though he leaned away from the inflamed area, he couldn’t take his eyes off it.

“It’s all right,” Princess Pride said. “I’m not going to die, and I won’t lose my legs either.”

The princess forced a smile. For a second, I thought the treatment was

already working, but then I noticed the sweat dripping down her face as she endured the pain. She was still extremely pale as well. Prince Cedric swallowed at the sight.

Her smile faded. "I'm sorry," she said, her words a bit slurred.

Prince Cedric and I stared at her, unable to believe our ears. Callum edged away from the conversation and went back to issuing orders to the other knights. He asked them to prepare bandages and go on the lookout for any new attacks. Princess Pride was still speaking, her quiet voice barely audible over Callum and the knights.

"I said I would protect you." Her voice was laden with regret.

My chest clenched tight. How could she apologize when she was the one who'd suffered the most in all this? Prince Cedric didn't respond. He just gritted his teeth as Princess Pride stroked an armored finger along his cheek. Seeming on the verge of tears, she tenderly cupped his face. The prince's jaw clenched, and he had to pry open his mouth to respond.

"What the hell are you *talking* about?!" he asked, his volume increasing with each word. "It's my fault that you... It should've... It should've been me!"

Prince Cedric's fists trembled as he spit out those words. He screwed up his face when he was done and fell silent, hanging his head and shuddering as if restraining himself from some greater action.

"It's not your fault," Princess Pride said. "I would have run off whether you were there or not."

Her lips twitched in her pasted-on smile. I couldn't bear to witness her struggle. I wished I could beg her not to talk anymore. As much as she tried to put on a tough front, her pain was evident.

"Cedric."

The silent prince was still trembling as Princess Pride cupped his cheek once more. She traced her fingers along the side of his head and through his hair, but he never lifted his gaze.

"It's all right," she said. "This world is kinder to you than you know."

Those words drew his eyes back up to hers. Tears shimmered as he moved. He opened and closed his mouth a few times as though he wished to speak, but nothing emerged aside from his own breath. Princess Pride appeared tickled by this behavior, and her smile relaxed.

The ease in her expression made me look back down at her leg. Some of the redness had eased, and the swelling wasn't as bad as before. Color seeped back into her face as well.

"The true 'you' will be able to protect even more of the things you care about," she said.

Princess Pride sat up a little further. But the motion jostled her leg, and her face scrunched up in pain. Still, she held Prince Cedric's cheek in her hand like the pain didn't even bother her.

"You're the little brother to two wonderful kings. You're their pride and joy."

Tears glimmered in Prince Cedric's eyes, illuminated by his fierce inner fire. When they emerged, it was in a wave more powerful than his first. The tears streamed down to his lips, where he was clenching his teeth. The prince just stood there staring and letting them flow, as though he'd forgotten how to blink.

Unable to respond, Princess Pride continued stroking his hair, repeating reassuring words. So gentle and comforting was her presence that she was practically glowing.

Then Her Highness, now sweating less than before, finally gave her injuries some attention. She moved her right leg, letting out a little groan from the motion.

"Please don't move!" the knight treating her shouted. He wrapped the leg with bandages to keep it fixed in place.

"See? I'm fine now! It doesn't hurt if I don't move it. Thank you for your help." She tried to reassure the knight and smile at Prince Cedric, but the prince was still crying.

"Am I getting too heavy for you to carry, Captain Alan?" she asked. Her voice was bright and cheery, like she was trying to lighten the mood.

“No, you’re not heavy at all!” I said.

She smiled in relief, even with her injured leg still dangling limply. She tried to remove her right glove from her hand but paused, wrinkling her brow in confusion. It was like her hands had run out of strength entirely.

“I’m sorry, Captain Callum, but could you please remove my right glove?”

With a guilty smile, she extended her hand toward Callum, who’d just returned to check on her treatment. He peeled off her glove, but we both knew what she was about to do. He didn’t waste a second in taking her gloved hand in his. Right away, Callum and I both knew what her plan was. We gulped in tandem.

Once Callum got the glove off, her pale, dainty fingers slowly curled and uncurled. A knight was now bandaging her left leg to secure it as well.

TwEEEEEEet!

Princess Pride had stuck her fingers in her mouth to issue a shrill whistle. In an instant, Prince Stale teleported to the scene.

In an instant, Prince Stale took in Her Highness’s injuries...and his face went pale.

“Stale!”

He had appeared at my side as soon as he heard the signal. When he took in the damage, all the blood drained from his face. His eyes went wide; his hands trembled. He approached me with stuttering steps and a look of pure shock.

“Stale, I’m sorry to call for you in public like this,” I said.

I wasn’t supposed to resort to this in front of people like Cedric and the other knights. But this was my only option at the moment.

Stale was still speechless. He just continued to gape at my legs. “Elder Sister... How did this...?”

His mouth flapped like he couldn’t find the right words. As confused as he was, he managed to shoot a stern glare at Captain Callum and Captain Alan. It

sent a chill down my spine. I opened my mouth to explain.

“It’s my fault.”

Cedric beat me to the punch. He squeezed his fists to stop the tears in his eyes from spilling over. Stale whipped his head around at that, face going red. But Captain Callum and Captain Alan tried to interrupt.

“That’s not true, Your Highness! As imperial knights, it’s our responsibility to —”

Stale wasn’t listening. A familiar mixture of fury and passion lit his eyes. He grabbed Cedric by the collar, but I cried out to stop him.

“Stale, wait!”

Captain Alan jerked at my shriek, and Stale released Cedric with a gasp. I couldn’t run to him, as much as I wanted to, so I simply held my hands out to him. Stale snapped to his senses and ran over, crying out for me. I wrapped my arms around his neck to calm him down, then stroked his hair.

“It’s okay. I’m just fine, see?” I repeated the words over and over until he calmed down a bit. He was still breathing a bit raggedly when I pushed on, though.

“Please listen to me, Stale. It’s not Cedric’s fault. I got hurt because I ran off on my own. Captain Callum and Captain Alan put their lives on the line for me. They were ready to give up their own lives to save me. If it weren’t for them, I wouldn’t have made it out alive. So please know that I’m the only one to blame here.”

I caressed his cheek, hoping to assuage his worries. Yet no matter how soothing I tried to be, Stale pressed his trembling lips into a tight, tense line. He nodded, then glared down at the ground. “Arthur...” he began, then stopped himself, gnashing his teeth. “I promised him...I would protect...”

He nearly choked on his own words. I didn’t know who those words were truly meant for, but they cast a pall over the whole scene. Captain Callum’s expression darkened, and Captain Alan’s arms tensed around me.

As my steward—no, as my younger brother—Stale blamed himself for my

injury. My heart ached worse than my legs at the thought. I'd selfishly tried to do everything on my own and then hide the fallout from Stale, and it had only made him worry more.

"Stale, I have a favor to ask," I said.

I moved from cupping his face to cradling his shaking fists. Even through his armored gloves, I could tell how tightly he was squeezing them. He raised his head a little and simply replied, "Anything." But his eyes wavered like he was on the verge of tears.

"I won't be able to walk for the rest of the day. I'm sure I'll be a burden to everyone, but please don't send me back to Freesia yet. I want to stay with the people here as the queen's proxy. I want to share the fate of our ally, the United Hanazuo Kingdom. It's too soon for me to run away!"

I gripped Stale's hands, begging for his understanding. While Stale could choose to teleport me back to Freesia against my will any moment, he had also done so much to support both Hanazuo and me. He'd already let me ask so much of him.

Stale pressed his lips together like he was in pain. He fell silent for some time.

In the eerie quiet, the cries of enemy soldiers rose, likely because the collapse had been over for a while now. They might have been pouring in from the south again. My pulse raced and my stomach twisted as I awaited Stale's verdict. If we didn't hurry, the enemies we'd just stopped would breach the castle this time.

I prepared to press him again. "Stale—"

"I'll do whatever you wish, Pride," he whispered into my ear.

I blinked, pulling back to peer at his face. His fear had melted away, replaced by his usual calm expression.

"It's dangerous to stay here, though. Let's return to the Cercian castle," he said. Stale exchanged looks with Captain Callum and Captain Alan, then turned his entire body toward Cedric, who'd finally stopped crying. "Prince Cedric?"

Cedric wiped his eyes on his sleeve, swallowed nervously, and stared back.

Stale offered a deep, polite bow. "I apologize for my poor manners earlier. I

hope you'll forgive me."

This only seemed to fluster Cedric more. "I-It's fine!" he insisted, trying to get Stale to stop bowing.

With that, Stale stood up straight again. "Captain Alan, Captain Callum, we'll return to the castle for the time being. Please choose which knights will come with us and which will stay to prevent the enemies from reaching the castle."

The captains nodded at Stale's orders.

"Also..." Stale trailed off, eyes skittering away, as though he was nervous, then met their eyes again. "As always, please continue to look after my elder sister as her imperial knights."

The two knights voiced their agreement instantly. Captain Callum started sorting out which knights would go where.

With a final thank-you to the knights who'd treated my injuries and a request for a detailed update later, Stale prepared to teleport away. He first touched Cedric to teleport him. Then he approached me and the knights to send us off.

"I'll be there as soon as I teleport the rest of the knights," he said as he took my hand.

I nodded and thanked him.

In a more tender voice, he added, "I'm so sorry... I know you trusted me." He cast his eyes to the ground like a child bracing for a scolding.

I couldn't help but laugh. "What are you talking about?!"

He raised his head, surprised, and I stroked his hair again with my ungloved hand.

"You came when I called for you," I said. "I'll always trust you, no matter what."

He'd allowed a burden like me to remain on the battlefield. He'd even sent Val here and recommended these strong, capable men as my imperial knights back when they were first chosen. If it weren't for Stale, who knew how many times I might have died or gotten myself in trouble already? I truly couldn't thank him enough. Yet here he was apologizing to me instead.

Stale's eyes opened wider, but then a quiet smile stole across his lips. He took my hand, then reached the other one out for Captain Callum. One breath later, the world vanished.

"Big Sister! Are you sure you're all right?! What happened?!"

"Why did Prince Stale bring you here instead of sending you to Freesia?!"

The moment we teleported into the Cercian castle, I had to reassure a teary-eyed Tiara and pale-faced Prime Minister Gilbert. The prime minister demanded an explanation, but I told him I would wait until Stale returned. Cedric, his face twisted with guilt, tried to take the blame, but I grabbed his arm to silence him. If Prime Minister Gilbert truly believed this was all Cedric's fault, he might actually do something about it.

Tiara cuddled right up to me, choking back tears. "I'm so sorry! I couldn't do anything...just like always!" Yet I was the one who'd insisted she stay in the castle, instead of going back to Freesia like she probably should have.

Cedric ordered a guard to bring a chair over. Captain Alan set me down gently into it. I apologized for him having to carry me for so long in all my armor, but he simply said it was fine. Even for a knight, he was quite strong—to be expected of a captain, perhaps.

"Sorry for the delay, Elder Sister," Stale said when he reappeared. He'd finished transporting all the knights, and it was a relief to see him in his usual calm state. He even smiled when I called his name.

After that, I tried to bring order back to the situation. We needed to sort out this whole mess. Captain Callum attempted to start by detailing my injury, but I cut in, preferring to explain it myself. I didn't want him or any of the others using the opportunity to blame themselves for this.

I provided an objective—or close to it—account of the collapse of the southern wing of the castle. A guard had fallen unconscious while trying to evacuate, and I had to ask Captain Callum to restrain Cedric to keep him from rushing in to save the man. Stale and Prime Minister Gilbert nodded along with my explanation. Tiara, meanwhile, had gone completely pale. This whole story

had to be painful for her to hear.

Prime Minister Gilbert followed up with very simple questions, such as, “What was Captain Alan doing at that point?” and “Where was Captain Callum?” Frankly, it was a little intimidating, but Captain Alan and Captain Callum didn’t hesitate to answer. As captains, their professionalism was truly impressive.

Once the story was over, the prime minister muttered, “I see. It sounds like no one failed in their duties.” Finally, my shoulders relaxed a tick—although the two captains didn’t look particularly reassured.

Next, the knights who worked on my legs explained their diagnosis. They had used their special powers to reduce the pain and stop the injury from being aggravated any further, but healing it fully would take time. For now, I needed to prioritize resting. Moving my leg would interfere with the healing process, to say nothing of how painful it would be. Even though I’d expected this prognosis, it still left my mood deflated. I swallowed hard.

“Princess Pride! Please leave the battlefield immediately!” King Yohan, his face as pale as Tiara’s, cried out through one of the broadcasts. *“How...how can you stay there in your condition?!”* The king just kept stammering, unsure of what to say.

“No. I have every intention of staying in this country.”

King Yohan’s handsome face twisted with pain. He demanded an explanation, and I offered the best reasoning I had. It wasn’t just for him; Prime Minister Gilbert and Tiara hung on to every word as well.

“I made up my mind to share in the fate of Hanazuo, our ally,” I said. “I’ll be with you until the end.”

I glared right back at the image before me. King Yohan fell silent, seeming to understand my resolve. I let the quiet spread for a moment, then turned to Prime Minister Gilbert and asked him how the northern front fared in the hopes of changing the subject.

“Princess Pride, have I heard the situation correctly?”

Oh nooo! I gulped when I heard that voice, heavier than lead. I turned to face the broadcast, previously obscured by smoke so only the communication

specialist remained visible. Commander Roderick filled my view.

Regret hit me like a punch to the gut. I wanted to cut the transmission off, but I was also glad to see the commander alive as well, as terrifying as he was right now.

“Yes, I believe you heard the full story,” Stale said.

On the other side of the broadcast, Commander Roderick narrowed his eyes.

This is bad! He’s definitely furious with me!

“You already forgot what I told you six years ago...”

My blood ran cold. *I already knew I had to apologize to Commander Roderick, but this is way worse than I feared!*

“Um... No, I...” I stammered, lips trembling. Our eyes locked across the transmissions, making me flinch.

Just then, from behind me, Captain Callum and Captain Alan bowed swiftly and cried, “Forgive us!”

Commander Roderick closed his eyes with a sigh after the apologies. *“We’ll discuss this once we return home.”*

Then he ordered the captains to be more alert from here on out.

“The order is locked in a stalemate,” Commander Roderick continued eventually. *“We have medics with special powers treating our most gravely injured men. We’re also rearranging each unit to bolster them before the enemy makes their next move. By the way, since only the communication specialist and I have heard this conversation, there’s no need to worry about a loss of morale.”*

That last sentence carried immense weight. Prime Minister Gilbert and Stale nodded, but all I could do was sit there and look around the room.

Something glinted in Commander Roderick’s eyes. *“We’ll be ready for new orders at any time. My knights are well prepared.”*

Prime Minister Gilbert let out a soft breath. “We’ve suffered damages here as well, so ending things quickly is one avenue we can pursue. The biggest hindrance right now is the enemy invasion at the southern border of both

countries. We received word earlier from King Lance, in the village near the Chinensian castle, that the enemy's focus had switched from the castle to the village. Enemies continue to swarm the southern region of Cercis as well. Our knights retreated after the collapse of the castle and are now heading back to the area."

Enemy soldiers were storming the southern regions of both Chinensis and Cercis, where I'd tried to go with reinforcements. The collapse of the southern wing had halted them for a little while, but now they were rushing back to continue the siege. The communication specialist with King Lance had quickly reported on their status, but even as he spoke, the clash of swords and roar of enemies rang out behind him. It was like watching shaky camera footage on a tumultuous live broadcast.

King Yohan's headquarters had been saved thanks to the fine work of the Eighth Squadron, which was a relief—but if the enemies targeted the local village with that same amount of force, the Chinensian people would be in danger. That danger also awaited Cercis if anything happened to King Lance.

We couldn't afford to waste any time or energy at this crucial point in the battle. I wanted to send reinforcements to King Lance, but everyone outside of this room had their hands full at the moment. We needed to end the war as swiftly as possible.

"As for Princess Pride..."

Prime Minister Gilbert hesitated before continuing, gaze sweeping to my legs. I wanted to stay here until the defensive war was over, but my presence diverted soldiers here to serve as guards. At this point, I was holding the whole army back.

I also wasn't the only one in this castle who required constant guarding. We had to split up to prevent a concentrated attack on these softer targets. Our firepower was already lacking, and keeping so many knights here would only weaken us further. I should have taken knights to the southern border, or at least to the village near the castle in Chinensis, but the current state of my legs made me dead weight. I knew Stale and Prime Minister Gilbert must feel the same way. How were we to divide up our soldiers? Where could we draw from

to send reinforcements to the south of Cercis and Chinensis? How could we deal with a total burden like me, who was just spreading our already limited resources thin? None of us had the answers yet.

“I’ll go!”

A powerful voice broke through the discussion. Cedric. He was squeezing his fists and gritting his teeth. Though he shifted awkwardly under the sudden attention, he soon straightened his back and continued.

“I’ll take the Freesian knights to the south of Chinensis as reinforcements. That will help us distribute our forces a little better.”

The Cercian prime minister and seneschal immediately begged Cedric to stay here and command the troops in Cercis instead.

“Fargus, Dario... You two will be here,” Cedric said, rejecting the suggestion. He explained that Prime Minister Gilbert could continue to command the Cercian troops here. Since Cedric hadn’t been serving any use, he should be the one to go.

Not even Prime Minister Dario knew how to respond to Cedric’s casual disregard for his own safety.

“I want you to let me borrow some of the knights and communication specialists that have been following Pride so far,” Cedric said. “Prince Stale, send me... *Please* send me to the village in Chinensis.”

Cedric stood up straight to deliver that request, and Stale nodded. Yet King Yohan cried out from the broadcast.

“Cedric! You’re being reckless! Even for you, this is too much... You’ve never even held a sword before!”

All eyes turned to Cedric after King Yohan’s outburst. Cedric looked out of the window to avoid the attention. I knew what we were all thinking: How had a prince spent seventeen years never once studying swordplay? But this was the same as the game. By the start of ORL, Cedric had never really studied much of anything before—not until one year before the beginning of the story.

Cedric simply replied that it would be okay. He gripped the sword at his hip,

unable to take his eyes off of the window.

“I’m the second-born prince of Cercis,” he said. “I can’t let my big bro, the king of Cercis, die because I wanted to protect myself.”

Prime Minister Gilbert and Stale were a bit taken aback by the blunt statement. They certainly didn’t want to send such an inexperienced prince into a warzone.

King Lance had originally told Cedric to stay behind and wait for his return. Even if Cedric wanted to go now, sending him to the battlefield could have huge repercussions if he was harmed in any way. It would also be difficult to rescue him once he was teleported to the village. A communication specialist could contact us, but once they were outside of known coordinates, we would be unable to initiate contact with them. Stale couldn’t teleport directly to Cedric’s location yet either. And with how Cedric had acted previously, Stale and the others might see sending him to the village as a death sentence.

With no clear path, we hit a standstill. I opened my mouth to break it, but someone else beat me to the punch.

“Then what about this?” came a light, spirited voice.

Everyone whirled toward the sound, stunned.

“I will accompany Prince Cedric to Chinensis as Big Sister’s proxy!” Tiara said.

Tiara Royal Ivy was supposed to be the frail, kindhearted princess who deserved protection more than anyone else in this world. Yet her voice rang out clear and strong, like a bell chiming through the room.

I gasped. “Tiara?”

I was too shocked to close my mouth. Tiara simply smiled back at me like always.

“Princess Tiara?!” Commander Roderick croaked through the transmission.

How could I ever make Tiara of all people face a dangerous situation for my sake? I’d asked her to stay in Cercis during the war so that nothing like this would happen to her. Emotion swirled in my head, leaving me dizzy. I couldn’t find the right words, so I just opened and closed my mouth over and over again.

“That way, Big Brother can take some knights to the south of Cercis,” Tiara continued calmly, heedless of our shock. “I think that will help us distribute our forces in a way that’s more efficient.”

“Tiara, this isn’t a game,” Stale said. “It’s war. You could be killed.”

Tiara appeared unfazed. “But won’t that make you feel better, just in case something bad does happen?”

Stale furrowed his brow. She must have been talking about the special signal to call for him. Just like me, Tiara could whistle for Stale and he could teleport to her directly.

“No, it’s too dangerous.”

“But I’m fifteen now! I’m the second-born princess!” Tiara protested.

Stale just continued to shake his head, arms crossed over his chest. “You don’t know how to fight. The knights will have their hands full looking after you.”

He was correct about that. Despite going to the battlefield as the queen’s proxy, my usual role was away from the fighting. I had to raise morale and command the troops. I had only made a mess of things because I abused my last boss cheats.

Even Stale, who’d received formal fencing training as a member of the royal family, never went to the battlefield without a few knights around him for protection. But we’d have to send even more knights than usual for the delicate Tiara. It wouldn’t actually help us turn the tide of battle if we had to send so many knights after Tiara.

“This is a serious situation. If you keep acting silly, I’ll send you back to Freesia.”

“If you do, I’ll tell Big Sister and Arthur all your embarrassing secrets!”

“What?!” Stale cried, suddenly flustered. Red flushed into his cheeks. I tried to meet his eyes, but his head jerked away.

What’s this, now, little brother?

With her cheeks puffed out, Tiara went in for the kill. “I’ll tell Uncle Vest and

Prime Minister Gilbert too!” she shouted, stealing all the words right out of Stale’s mouth. She definitely wasn’t getting sent home any time soon.

“Wait just a moment, Your Highness!” Commander Roderick blurted, reeling.

Prime Minister Gilbert looked similarly startled. There seemed to be more on his mind, however. Judging by his silence, I assumed he was just as concerned about Tiara as the rest of us.

Unfortunately, Stale and Tiara’s spat drowned out Commander Roderick’s words.

“Time is of the essence!”

“I know! That’s why I...”

“T-Tiara, calm down. Stale’s just worried that you might—”

“I want to help you too, Big Sister!” Tiara shouted over me.

Fwish! Fwish! Fwish!

Something flashed past Stale.

Captain Alan and Captain Callum instinctively covered me with their bodies, but the objects passed straight by us and hit the wall harmlessly, somehow bypassing every human in the cramped room. It was like the attacker had aimed specifically for the gaps between us.

The room went silent, everyone gaping at the three knives jutting from the wall. They were extremely plain, but I recognized them immediately. No one dared break the silence. Even Commander Roderick, as I could tell from the corner of my eye, watched through the transmission with his mouth agape.

It was Prime Minister Gilbert who finally spoke. “Princess Tiara, please don’t get so upset.”

Tiara exhaled quietly. “I can fight too. I’m the sibling of Big Brother and Big Sister, after all! See? There’s no problem!”

My little sister was holding a knife between her fingers. Stale hadn’t moved a muscle. I could hardly imagine the look on his face right now; I still couldn’t believe this myself.

“Tiara, where could you have possibly...?”

“Sending reinforcements is more important than worrying about that right now.”

Tiara being the one to scold a flustered Stale was quite the role reversal.

“Don’t you want to help Big Sister too?!” she asked him. “Well, I feel the same way! I promise I’ll call for you if anything happens!”

Then Tiara grabbed Stale’s hand. Conflicting emotions warred on Stale’s face as Tiara’s stare bore into his eyes. Finally, he turned away in defeat.

“Promise me, okay?” he said. “Don’t forget how heartbroken she and I will be if anything happens to you, got it?!” He grabbed Tiara by the shoulders when he finished.

“Of course!”

Stale released her, let out a deep sigh, and pressed his fingertips to the frames of his glasses. “As soon as everything’s over, you have to tell us about the knife-throwing.” He glared ever so slightly at Tiara, who nodded her assent.

“Princess Tiara...” Cedric blinked at Tiara with wide eyes, still processing the whole situation.

Tiara shot him a surprisingly harsh look. “I’m not doing this for you! It’s for your people—and for my big sister!”

Cedric closed his mouth with a gulp, unable to reply, and bowed his head at Tiara in gratitude. Tiara just puffed up her cheeks again and turned away from him.

Prime Minister Gilbert explained the plan while Captain Callum and Captain Alan began to select knights to accompany Cedric and Tiara. Stale also stepped in to discuss which knights he would take to Cercis.

“Tiara, did you...?” My voice petered out as I struggled for words.

Tiara offered me a shy smile and hid her knife back up her sleeve. When she approached, she grimaced at the sight of my bandaged legs, as though she were the one in pain.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you after last time,” she said, looking guilty. “I thought you might stop me if I came clean. You too, Captain Alan.”

“I-It’s fine!” Captain Alan stammered. He must have figured this all out before now.

Then it clicked for me as well. The second day of Cedric’s visit to Freesia. It was Tiara who threw the knives at Cedric to stop him from fighting with me in the garden.

When I replayed the whole incident in my mind, the knives’ trajectory meant they had to have come from Tiara. It also matched the account my imperial knights had told me. Moreover, Tiara had been moving a little differently than usual, like she was weighed down a bit.

My mind swirled with questions, but Tiara said, “I wanted to be strong like you, Big Sister.”

I was going to ask her why she chose knives of all things when a scene from one of the game’s routes flashed in my mind. Most of the routes ended the same way: Pride, the last boss, always suffered for her sins via a grisly death at the hands of the love interest or the heroine.

The love interest *or* the heroine.

The love interest character was almost always the one to carry out the execution—*almost* always. Just once, the story strayed from the norm. The delicate heroine, Tiara, defeated Pride with her own two hands in one of the routes.

It was none other than Stale’s route.

After signing the fealty contract, Stale couldn’t kill Pride—his mistress. Toward the end of the game, he gave Tiara a knife with which to challenge Pride herself.

It was the same knife he’d used all those years ago to kill his own mother.

“Do you get it, Tiara? If I’m given orders to kill you, then you have to use this knife on me!”

He said those exact words to Tiara as he handed her the knife. He begged her

to kill him before he could carry out any potential orders to kill Tiara first. If he was going to die, then he wanted to die at the hands of someone he loved, with the blade that had claimed his mother's life.

"I can't! There must be another way..." Tiara said in the game, teary-eyed at the demand from her dearest brother, the man she'd come to love more than anyone.

She wrapped her hands around the knife and desperately shook her head back at him. But Stale wouldn't be persuaded. He said he'd rather have Tiara kill him than kill her instead. Reluctantly, Tiara eventually stowed the knife away in her pocket with a nod.

"If only we could run away together," she said. "Or if you could escape on your own..."

"Hearing you say that is all I need," Stale replied. "But if I do that, I won't be able to protect you. Besides, my fealty contract means I can never escape the queen. You understand that, don't you?"

Tiara nodded, still in tears. "I know. I know," she continued in a whisper. Finally, she raised her head and told him that everything would be all right. "I'll protect you too, I promise! I'll never let you die!"

She vowed to protect her beloved Stale from whatever Pride might do to him. At the end of the game, Queen Pride used the fealty contract to challenge Stale to a duel.

"Come and get me! Let's have some fun on the last day of your life!" she screeched.

Stale emerged from the duel victorious, but just as he was about to deliver the final blow...

"I strip you of all permissions."

Queen Pride cackled as she issued that command. Stale lost his ability to bring his sword down against her. The queen toyed with Stale, then ordered him to take his own life. That was when Tiara sent that knife flying straight at Pride.

"Gaaaaah!"

Confident in her victory, Pride didn't notice the knife until it was sticking out of her heart. She clutched at her chest and collapsed, struggling for breath. Blood drained from her heart and spurted out of her mouth when she coughed. She glared at Tiara with intense hatred, giving her one last evil grimace, then succumbed in the pool of blood. It dyed her scarlet hair an even brighter red as she lay in the puddle.

"Ugh! Hic... Ngh!"

Tiara broke down in tears over the guilt of killing her own sister. Stale wrapped her in his arms, trying to comfort her as best he could. It was a heartbreaking scene.

I felt that heartbreak even stronger after reincarnating.

Evidently, Tiara was pretty handy with throwing knives. She'd even taken out Pride, the last boss, with a single blade right to the heart. It was similar to how I, as the last boss from the game, could fight with a sword, gun, or martial arts. I supposed Tiara had a specialty of her own—knives.

"Listen, Big Sister," Tiara said back in the present, "It's all right. I'm going to be the one to protect you this time!"

She smiled softly and wrapped me in a gentle hug. In my trance, I didn't even realize that I was squeezing her back. Tiara, the heroine of this world, never once fought in a war during the game.

"Please be smart out there," I told her. "Call for Stale right away if anything happens."

"Of course! I'll never do anything to make you or Big Brother sad."

Why did she decide to start using knives? When did she train to the point that she's so confident with them now?

I had so many questions; it was impossible to collect my thoughts into something coherent. All I knew for sure was that the Tiara standing in front of me right now intended to join the battle for our sake.

"You've already done so much for us." Tiara released me from the hug and stepped away, smiling shyly.

Behind her, Stale was working with the knights to prepare for the next advances they would take, while Prime Minister Gilbert conducted one last meeting with Commander Roderick and the knights who would accompany Tiara. Cedric gripped his sword as he observed us all.

“Now it’s our turn to come to *your* rescue, Big Sister!”

My heart skipped a beat at the sight of her bright, sunny smile.

“Prince Stale, are these knights satisfactory to take with you to the south of Cercis?” Prime Minister Gilbert asked as he wrapped up his meeting with the prince.

Stale nodded and adjusted his armor. “Yes, very much so. You’re in charge of everything here while I’m gone. That’s not a problem, is it?”

“Of course not,” Prime Minister Gilbert said with an elegant smile and deep bow. “Oh, I have one more idea for you...”

He leaned closer and whispered into Stale’s ear, angling away from the transmissions of the main camps. Stale’s eyes widened, and then the prime minister looked over at me.

“Naturally, Your Highnesses will be the ones to make the final decision,” the prime minister said. He backed away from Stale with a smile. I couldn’t help wondering what the heck all that had been about.

Stale grimaced and said, “You’re sure staying focused, even in the middle of an emergency.” Then he strode up to me. “Elder Sister, I’d like to talk with you for a moment.”

He glanced at Captain Alan and Captain Callum, stationed on either side of me, and added, “This concerns you two as well.”

The captains leaned in closer so that Stale could whisper to me where I sat in my chair. To be honest, I didn’t understand why this topic required such secrecy, but I agreed to the plan nonetheless. It sounded smart enough to me, and we couldn’t afford to waste any firepower. Still, I couldn’t help but wonder why this conversation had the captains sweating.

Stale just smiled and asked for my cooperation. He then went to speak to Tiara and the knights accompanying her.

Suddenly, raised voices came from the transmission of the northern front. I worried it was an ambush for a harrowing heartbeat, but realized I'd misread the commander's reaction. Commander Roderick handed over the transmission to the communication specialist and left to work on his final battle preparations. It seemed like we were finally all where we needed to be—or, well, almost all of us.

Cedric stared fixedly at the transmission displaying King Lance's headquarters.

"Cedric," I called to him.

He flinched, turning toward me. The fire in his eyes roared to life, and he rushed to where I sat. His handsome face contorted with guilt when he glanced at my leg.

"Didn't I tell you it's not your fault?" I said with a smile, but the expression on his face only turned gloomier.

I tried again: "Did you decide to lead the reinforcements to help King Lance?"

Cedric's eyebrows shot up. "No! It's not just that! It's for Big Brother, all the citizens, and you!"

He clamped down on his explanation, as though hesitant to continue. My smile turned a bit awkward, but at least he really did care about helping me.

"I just felt like...if I didn't actually do something now, then I'd be like this for the rest of my life," Cedric said, turning his gaze aside.

He clutched something tucked under his shirt. I took his trembling hand to steady it, but he winced at the contact.

"Cedric, listen closely."

I craned my neck to peer at him, practically looking at the ceiling. Cedric knelt so I could meet his eyes more easily.

"It's all right," I said. "Your inner self is a thousand times more radiant than your looks."

Cedric opened his mouth like he wanted to refute that, then cast his gaze aside again. He squeezed the front of his shirt and scrunched up his face. The tremble in his hand intensified. Judging by his reaction, he must not have understood me correctly.

“No, that’s not what I mean,” I said gently. I urged him to meet my gaze, and I could see the flames flicker in those red eyes of his.

“Don’t suppress your true self. When you’re doing everything you’re capable of and putting your every last effort into protecting those you care about, I think that’s when you’re the most radiant. It’s wonderful.”

His quaking ceased and his breathing fell still, like time had stopped for him. He stared at me, face frozen, wide eyes sparkling like fragile crystals.

“It will be okay. I believe your brothers have been waiting for you for a long time.”

His lower lip twitched, his eyes shimmering as his emotions swelled. I pulled him in against my armor to hide the tears before they spilled free in front of the others, but even as I stroked his head, the rest of his body began to tremble.

“Now go to them.”

I didn’t know when, exactly, time had stopped for him. All I knew was that the childish man I’d known ever since we first met, the man who never quite grew up—he had things he wanted to protect.

“Shout it out to the whole world. You’re the beloved younger brother of King Lance Silva Lowell.”

Cedric’s shoulders stiffened and his hands shook. He lifted his head slowly to meet my eyes. His face was bright red despite his desperate bid to keep from crying.

“You’re the beloved younger brother of King Yohan Linne Dwight as well,” I said. “I’m sure you know better than anyone else just how wonderful those two men are.”

I took one trembling hand and brought it up to my cheek. I could feel the shaking even through the cold fabric of his glove. He nodded over and over,

biting his bottom lip. I brought his other hand to my cheek.

“Hold your head up high. You’re the younger brother of the best kings in the world!”

I put all the force I could into those words. The flames in his wide eyes lurched, reflecting the light. He nodded vigorously. “Right!”

Prime Minister Gilbert told us it was time to get going. Tiara, the prime minister, and the knights were all watching Cedric and me. They must have finished preparing for battle. I released Cedric’s hands and he stood up slowly.

“I have to go,” he murmured, but I clasped his right hand in both of mine one last time.

Cedric was finally ready to stand on his own two feet. He was ready to undo his choice to freeze time for himself. But there was still one more thing I had to tell him.

“Now is the time to show off the fangs and claws you’ve kept hidden all this time, Cedric Silva Lowell!”

He shuddered as though frightened. Then he squeezed my hands in return. Cedric set his jaw, finally prepared. Those flaming eyes steadied and he stood up tall, sticking his chest out.

“Just you watch me, Pride Royal Ivy!” he said.

With that, he slipped his hand out of mine and turned on his heel, sending his jacket fluttering behind him like a cape. The breeze rustled my hair.

I watched Cedric depart in silence. He never once turned back to look at me again. He strode up to Tiara and the knights, exchanged words with Stale, and disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Cedric’s group was being teleported to a field in the town closest to the Chinensian castle—the town where King Lance would be. There, they would be able to grab horses and search for King Lance while slaying any enemies in their path.

Prime Minister Gilbert approached me next, filling in the spot where Cedric had been, and crouched down to meet my eyes. He was here to confirm the

specifics of the plan.

“Does everything sound satisfactory, Your Highness?”

“Yes, it does. Thank you, Prime Minister Gilbert.”

His smile was as elegant as ever as he returned, but he narrowed his slender eyes. “Your safety is paramount. Who knows how many souls would suffer if you perished? I would be one of them, you know.”

I swallowed at the reminder of just how much worry I’d caused for him. “I’m truly, *truly* sorry. I didn’t mean to make such a mess for you.”

“No, there’s no need to apologize to me. I only regret not being able to take on your pain myself.” He stared at my bandaged leg. “I would happily trade as many legs with you as you need.” He may have been joking, but that look in his eyes was anything but lighthearted. “Please rest well from here on out. I promise to bring you the conclusion to this war that you seek. We’re not going to let anyone else lay a single finger on you. That’s something everyone agrees on.”

Despite this reassurance, I couldn’t relax; a dark aura emanated from him as he made this promise. I forced a smile through the shudder rippling through me.

“Please don’t be afraid,” he said, trailing his hand in the air above my leg. The resulting gust swept across my bandages. “You mean more to us than anyone else. I’m sure there are plenty of others who feel the same. So many people could never live without you. I’m sure of it.”

The gravity in his voice left me no room for protest. I pressed my lips together instead.

“I suppose Prince Stale already made some recommendations,” Prime Minister Gilbert went on, his smile somewhat exasperated. “I can’t express it any better than that. I simply hope you’ll accept the fact that many people are hurt whenever you put yourself in danger.”

“Right...” I didn’t even notice that I’d hung my head.

“My apologies. I’ve said too much.” When I told him that wasn’t true, he

sighed. “You’re very dear to us, Princess Pride. Just as you care for us, we care for you. I eagerly await the day that you finally come to accept this fact.”

Prime Minister Gilbert’s voice was quiet as he made his case. When he was finished, he bowed his head deeply, then departed.

Stale approached me next, almost as if they had planned this procession in advance. “Look at me, Elder Sister.”

I was still shaking off my reaction to Prime Minister Gilbert’s words as I met Stale’s eyes.

“I want you to call me the second anything happens,” Stale said. “I don’t care where you are or who you’re with.”

Stale was headed to the south of Cercis with a group of knights who’d serve as reinforcements—something I was supposed to do before I got injured. I agreed that I would summon him the moment I needed him, but Stale wasn’t quite done yet.

“Thank you for calling me so quickly back then. If you’d hesitated, I...” He trailed off. I thanked him, trying to smile, but his face remained gloomy. He reached out to me, gently placing his hands over mine where they rested in my lap. “The truth is...I really don’t want to leave you right now.”

His tender murmur and the worry within made my heart ache. I was about to apologize, but he spoke up again.

“Nevertheless, I’m really, *really* glad I have this special power.”

His voice was suddenly so much brighter. I blinked as the smile on Stale’s face slowly morphed into something genuine. He gazed kindly at me.

“I can come running to your side no matter how far away you are,” he said. “Even if we’re separated, I can always be with you. It’s a privilege no one else has.”

Stale wrapped my hands in his. His cheeks flushed, his fretful air completely gone now.

“I’ll be there whenever you need me. So please, call for me at any time. Even if you can’t see me, I’m always with you.”

The palpable happiness in his voice warmed me to the core. His expression was compassionate and masculine. I soaked it up as I absorbed his words.

“I will,” I said.

The person in front of me wasn’t my younger brother—he was a grown man. My hazy mind suddenly recalled that he was my *adoptive* brother, not my literal younger brother. The boy I had constantly frightened, upset, and troubled with my actions was no longer here. I always felt that I had to protect him as his older sister. I never wanted to make him sad.

But suddenly, there he was, right before my eyes: a person protecting *me* instead. It wasn’t just Stale either. Today, I had been rescued by so many people.

Stale’s lips quirked up at my dazed state. “Please don’t worry about me,” he said, releasing my hands to rest his palm against the sword at his waist.

The man in front of me—clad in armor and a jet-black uniform, smiling with all the strength in the world—wasn’t the Stale Royal Ivy I knew from the game.

“I’m strong too, you know. My partner and I have spent years polishing our skills with a sword.”

He pressed the black frames of his glasses up and stuck his hand out for me to take, almost like he was inviting me to join him for a dance. I took it. He used the other to gesture to the two imperial knights on either side of me.

“Please take good care of her,” he said, offering them handshakes. “I don’t want you to worry. We’ll bring you your victory in this war.”

My heart skipped a beat at the ring of those loud, clear words. I couldn’t summon a response. Before I untangled my touch, the world shifted before me.

“Princess Pride?!”

The second I teleported with my two imperial knights, someone called out for me.

“Why have you come here?!”

I searched for the source of the voice, my gaze landing on King Yohan. Captain Alan and Captain Callum offered their greetings, and I followed up with one of

my own from my seat.

“I’m sorry to barge in all of a sudden,” I told the king.

We’d come to the main headquarters of Chinensis. This was the place where I would watch over the final stages of the war.

“That said, I’ll be right here with you.”

The final counterattack was about to begin.

Chapter 2:

The Blasphemous Princess and the Counterattack

“YOU WANT *HIM*?!”

King Yohan balked at my request. The communication specialists at the base of operations in the Chinensian castle transmitted multiple images all around the room so we could observe the entire war in real time. Thanks to them, we could see the Cercian border, the base of operations in the Cercian castle, the village in Chinensis, and the front lines to the north. We would certainly receive a transmission if anything happened to Stale or Tiara’s groups, but for now, there was no visual of their locations.

I’d been worried about the commotion and vibrations I was witnessing on the broadcast from the northern front, but the communication specialist explained in a strained voice that they were perfectly fine. I would likely be able to hear any bombings from my place in the Chinensian castle. Besides, the voices coming through that transmission seemed more like victory cheers than battle cries.

“That’s correct.” I nodded at King Yohan. “I want him. Is that acceptable?”

“Of course... You have every right to give him orders,” King Yohan responded, still taken aback. He then ordered a guard at the door to exit the room and bring in the man I’d asked for; it sounded as if he was close by. The guard stuck his head out the door, but he wasn’t fast enough.

All I felt was a slight breeze, and suddenly the man in question stood before us. He flipped his long black hair, lifted his head, and said, “How may I help you, King Yohan Linne...Dwiiight?!”

The unexpected arrival of his homeland’s princess apparently shocked him. I had never seen his eyes bulge like this before. His gaze drifted down to my legs next, and I realized just how much the injuries stood out. I hurried ahead of his questions by greeting him.

“Hello there, Captain Harrison,” I said. “King Yohan tells me you’ve been doing excellent work here.”

Captain Harrison Dirk was the leader of the Eighth Squadron and Arthur's direct superior. I had heard that he single-handedly took out most of the enemies who attempted to invade King Yohan's castle. He was truly a force to be reckoned with.

When I admitted I was the one who'd summoned him, he blinked rapidly. "Your Highness, I..."

Just as I opened my mouth to explain, Captain Harrison vanished.

It happened so fast, I thought he might have the same teleportation power as Stale, or at least some kind of invisibility power. I whirled around, looking for him.

"Alan Berners! Callum Bordeaux! What the hell have you two been doing?! Answer me!"

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up from that low, hostile growl. My eyes fell on Captain Harrison holding a knife and sword to the throats of Captain Callum and Captain Alan. King Yohan and I were too shocked to protest, but the two pinned captains remained composed, almost as if they were expecting this.

Captain Callum was the first to speak. "I won't make excuses. Just don't dull your blades for no good reason, Harrison."

"I get it, I get it," Captain Alan said. "You can deal with me however you want when the war's over."

The captains held their hands in the air like criminals surrendering to the authorities. Now I understood their strange reactions when Stale suggested I meet up with Captain Harrison.

"I misjudged you two," Captain Harrison growled. "Of all the people to be with her... You bask in the glory of being imperial knights while you let everything fall apart?! Alan Berners! Callum Bordeaux! Are your arms and brains just for show?!"

It seemed today had many firsts regarding Captain Harrison; I'd never seen him speak at such length before. I understood that he was shocked by my injuries, but this wasn't the time for infighting.

“Please wait just a moment, Captain Harrison!” I said. “I would have died if it weren’t for the two of them!”

Captain Harrison truly seemed on the verge of beheading the captains, so I begged him not to lash out in haste. The captain froze. I peeked at his face, barely visible beneath his long black hair. His eyes were fixed directly on me.

“I would like you to put your weapons down. It wasn’t their fault, I promise. Will you please listen to my side of the story?”



I spoke each word slowly and carefully, like a police negotiator trying to get a criminal to drop their gun in the TV shows from my past life.

Captain Harrison sheathed his knife and sword and zoomed back to the space in front of His Majesty and me, then fell to one knee. “My apologies,” he said simply, as if nothing had happened.

My mouth dropped open, but I quickly collected myself. “First of all, what happened to my leg is my own fault, so please don’t blame the two of them. I also came here today with a request for you.”

He bowed his head and did not protest, so I pushed on.

“Captain Harrison, I’m asking for your help because I have faith in your skills.”

He raised his head and his purple eyes met mine, only for him to avert them again. “I’ll do anything,” he replied, staring at the ground.

“As you can see, I won’t be able to move my legs for the rest of the day,” I said. “However, the situation on all fronts is currently approaching the final stages, including to the north. Chinensis is also suffering an invasion from the southern border.”

Captain Harrison, still kneeling before me, shuddered ever so slightly. He looked frightened, although that couldn’t have been the case. He lifted his head up just a little, waiting for me to continue.

“However, there’s something I would like to ask of you: I want you to head to the southern border and work to suppress the invasion there. You can take as many knights as you—”

“Very well. I can handle it alone.”

I never expected such an interruption. Captain Harrison was gripping his sheathed sword again. His lips curved into the faintest of smiles, contorting his handsome features into something out of a horror movie. I recoiled, and it clicked for me why Arthur always called Captain Harrison “scary.”

Prime Minister Gilbert had first suggested this plan. By heading to Chinensis with my imperial knights, some of the other guards at the castle could move to new locations. Captain Harrison was the closest knight to the headquarters at

the castle, but more importantly, he was extremely capable. According to Prime Minister Gilbert, Captain Harrison could put a damper on the enemy invasion to the south all on his own, and I had agreed, though I'd wondered if he needed some sort of backup. I never expected Captain Harrison to truly insist on going it alone.

"Leave it to me, Your Highness."

He rose in one fluid motion. I half expected him to do his teleportation thing again, so I called out to him before he could disappear. "Please, just don't do anything reckless!"

Fighting a surging army of enemy soldiers alone was unthinkable dangerous. It wasn't a job for one knight alone. Surprise stunned him for a moment; then he dropped to a knee to say, "As you wish." The captain slowly stood up once more and looked over my shoulder.

"Alan Berners. Callum Bordeaux. There better not be a single scratch on her when I return." He unsheathed his sword and pointed it at the throats of both captains with a glare. The glint in his purple eyes was as sharp as his blade.

Captain Alan and Captain Callum nodded their agreement. Captain Harrison gave His Majesty and me one last bow, and with another gust of wind, he was gone.

"He's really going alone?" King Yohan asked. He stared blankly at the door, left open after the captain's abrupt disappearance.

I swallowed hard, feeling equally nervous, but Captain Callum stepped in to reassure us. "I believe he'll be all right," he said. "Knowing Harrison, he'll tell the knights here in the castle to take over his post, then he'll run straight to the south. I'm sure there are knights who would volunteer to go with him...but I know he prefers to do things alone."

"Harrison's never been very good with teamwork. But when it comes to strength...he's the real deal. I can guarantee that much," Captain Alan added. He spoke more quietly than usual.

"We apologize sincerely for the scene we and Harrison just caused."

When Captain Callum said as much, the two of them bowed in tandem. He

must have been referring to that bold threat Captain Harrison had issued. King Yohan and I both dismissed their concern.

Little did we know that in just half an hour, the invasion from the southern border would come to a complete and total halt.

“Can I ask you something, Princess Tiara?” Cedric shouted over the noise.

Knights cut through enemy soldiers as they searched the Chinensian village. Men whose special powers allowed them to jump to great heights soared into the air or sent other knights up in their place by touching them. From those heights, these knights could scan the whole battlefield, as well as check on the vulnerable townsfolk and evacuation sites. The goal was to meet up with King Lance’s party, who was scouting ahead.

“Yes, if it’s quick!” I snapped, harsher than usual. I was sharing a horse with a knight who controlled the animal for me. As the second-born princess, I didn’t have much practice riding at a gallop, and there was no time for me to learn in the middle of a battle.

The rest of the knights formed a protective ring around us. They maintained a defensive structure, cleaning up any enemy soldiers who crossed our path. They also rode close enough that we could talk—or yell, rather—to each other at any time. While all of this was perfectly logical, I didn’t like it.

“Why did you choose to come with me, if I might inquire?” Cedric asked, his voice annoyingly loud.

“I told you! I want to help my big sister and the people of Hanazuo!” I tried to glare, but Cedric clearly wasn’t accepting my answer.

“Yes, I heard that already—I know it wasn’t for me! Aren’t there other ways to help them, though?!”

I puffed out my cheeks in irritation. He unfortunately wasn’t wrong about that; I didn’t *need* to accompany him on this mission. Stale could have been the one to go, or I could have insisted Cedric stay back at the Cercian castle with me.

But I wasn't backing down. I faced Cedric head-on, leaving the horse to the knight riding behind me. I sucked in a breath, then said, "Because I didn't want you to die out here! Big Brother's not silly enough to travel with someone who's nothing more than a burden! Dummy!"

Cedric's eyes went wide when he heard me insulting him again, not to mention calling him a *burden*. Even some of the knights did double takes at my words.

"I wanted to keep my knives a secret! It's all your fault, you idiot! You fool! You absolute buffoon!"

The prince seemed overcome by my outburst. "I...I apologize."

"My big sister would've definitely taken you with her! So I did the same! Also..." My voice petered out, my rage faltering. I looked away for a moment before fixing Cedric with a piercing gaze. The moment our eyes met, I shouted, "Idiot!"

Cooling down but still in a huff, I added, "Also, don't speak to me so formally. You talk to my sister as an equal, so treat me the same way. It's hard to talk to you when you're being so proper. She's the firstborn princess, sure, but I'm second in line. You don't need to be so uptight. I never mentioned it before because I was trying to avoid speaking with you." I gave him little choice but to acquiesce.

"Fine," Cedric said. "Then don't speak to me formally either...*Tiara*."

Cedric agreed to my terms, and I let the matter drop. I focused instead on the road before us, taking the reins back from the knight. Cedric did the same, when suddenly...

"Cercian soldiers have been spotted ahead!" another knight cried out. "They're engaging in battle at the town square!"

The knight delivered his report after dropping back out of the sky. He pointed in the exact direction we were already headed.

"Bro!"

"Let's hurry!"

Cedric and I cried out at the same time, then snapped our reins to send our horses charging forward. We had to get to King Lance and his soldiers as quickly as possible.

“King Yohan, are you worried about King Lance and Prince Cedric?” Princess Pride asked. She was at my side, smiling serenely. She must have picked up on my dour mood.

I sat on a sofa in the main headquarters of the Chinensian castle. I smiled back at the princess half-heartedly, unable to muster up anything more. All I could do was lean forward, lace my fingers together, and stare at the transmissions. Everything looked calm enough for the moment, but an intense brawl waged on the broadcast from Lance’s location. Though we hadn’t received any distressing reports on that front, it seemed like only a matter of time. I hoped Cedric’s group would reach them in time, yet I was also desperate for him to avoid enemy soldiers.

He’d spent his whole life avoiding studying and tutors. How was he supposed to fight a war now? Not even Lance, his own brother, had ever seen him train with a sword or learn self-defense maneuvers. No matter how many times I pleaded with Cedric to learn any kind of self-defense, he always stubbornly shook his head. *“I’m a prince, so I’ve got the best guards. I don’t need to learn self-defense!”* he’d say, ending the conversation there every time. He couldn’t comprehend the necessity of such skills in times of war, betrayal, or power struggles. He lacked the experience that would help him understand.

Even with Freesia’s knights accompanying him, the thought of that boy charging onto a battlefield was enough to tie my stomach in knots. A chill tingled through my limbs. Here I was, shut away in a castle and unable to do anything to help, while my best friend and little brother dove right into the heart of the battle. I could hardly bear to watch.

“I’m certain that Prince Cedric will be all right. I just know it,” Princess Pride said softly. I could not understand her optimism.

I didn’t know what exactly had happened between him and the princess during Cedric’s days in the Freesian castle, but I suddenly both wanted and

feared to know.

Cedric had left his homeland for our sake. Even if he ended up failing in his negotiations with Freesia, I didn't care. It was the first time that Cedric had ever left the country of his own will and therefore gotten a chance to learn about the outside world. My people and I were already prepared to surrender, so I felt it was safe to entrust my wishes to Cedric—to the second-born prince of Cercis. I clung to one last sliver of hope for the people of the United Hanazuo Kingdom. But more than that, I believed in him. Cedric never studied any etiquette, manners, or formal negotiation skills, and yet...

"I was sure to give him all sorts of 'gifts' before I sent him off," Princess Pride said, radiating confidence.

"What?!" I gaped at the princess. I couldn't even ask her what exactly she gifted him. The two knights at her back looked just as confused as I did.

Princess Pride was perfectly calm in the face of our astonishment. "I had a premonition," she said. "I'm certain that Prince Cedric will do well."

The word "premonition" caused a stir among the knights.

Her precognition.

I'd read about it once. All royal families in the country of Freesia—the one place in the world where people could be born with special powers—birthed at least one heir with the power of precognition. They believed that the person with this power was designated by God to become the next ruler of their land.

Princess Pride's lips moved while I stared at her in utter shock. I couldn't catch most of what she was saying, but two words snagged my attention. My heart nearly stopped dead in my chest.

How does she know?!

It was a phrase that was hardly ever spoken in Chinensis and Cercis, especially in the past few years. People regarded it as old-fashioned, something that had faded away over the years...or rather, something *forced* to fade away by Cedric himself.

Her Highness had just uttered Cedric's nickname.

“The enemy invasion has died down? But why?!” I asked.

I’d been cutting down every foe in my path, thinning the overwhelming flood of enemy soldiers, when they suddenly stopped. The village was still under attack, but the invasion itself was slackening.

I looked to the south and confirmed that the coil of enemies finally had an end. It was hard to make out, but I could finally see a tail to that horrible snake. I sighed, knowing the end was near and that my kingdom could return to some semblance of order. Until then, we had more foes to fell.

“King Lance! Bro!”

I halted in my tracks, suppressing the urge to leap toward the familiar voice. Instead, I slayed my current adversary and made sure my guards were still engaging the enemy. Only then did I turn to address the interloper.

My eyes went wide as I took in the sight of Cedric rushing toward me with the Freesia second-born princess, Tiara, at his side. “Cedric?!” I said. “How did you get here?!”

You idiot! Where do you think you are?! Why aren’t you at the castle?! This is a war zone!

All those admonishments sprang to my mind, but I didn’t have time to utter any of them. I had enough to do just fighting off enemies and commanding my troops. Plus, this was no time for an argument with my little brother.

Cedric arrived behind my group on his horse and signaled for his own knights to join the fray. Princess Tiara did likewise, leaving behind only enough men to protect the two of them. Freesian men with jumping powers sent the troops sailing through the air toward the front lines so they could put down this invasion at last.

“Don’t separate from me, Prince Cedric!” Princess Tiara said. “You’ll make trouble for the knights who are protecting us!”

“I know!” he responded, jaw tensing as he stared off in the direction of the battle.

Just then, a silver trail flashed past his face.

“What the hell?!”

The path of the knife led right to an enemy, who’d been trying to attack before that blade was buried in his throat. We both gaped at Princess Tiara—the unlikely source of that deadly throw. Her golden eyes blazed with determination.

“Stop looking away!” she cried. “It’s dangerous to let your guard down during a battle!”

Cedric stammered a vague response, visibly impressed. Princess Tiara clearly wasn’t used to being on horseback, but she’d still landed a perfect, precise hit and avoided Cedric and the knights in the meantime.

From what I learned later from Cedric, Tiara had also taken out multiple enemies during the trip to the village. The knights tried to insist that she keep enough weapons for herself and leave the attacking to them, but she’d simply opened her jacket, displaying a whole arsenal of knives.

“You’re really good with those,” Cedric said absently, the words slipping out of his mouth.

Princess Tiara just glared at him, clutching knives between her fingers. “Of course I am! I practiced a whole lot so I could protect my beloved sister! It was a lot of work!”

She sent another knife flying as she rebuked my brother. This one struck an enemy right in the forehead as he pointed his rifle in our direction. The little princess was even faster than the knights around us reaching for their guns.

“All this time, I’ve been searching for something I could do,” Princess Tiara went on. “I knew I couldn’t protect my sister or anyone else unless I got stronger!”

The princess sent more knives off with a flash. Each landed with a thud in an enemy’s weapon, ruining their aim before they could shoot. The knights seized the opportunity, plunging in to take down the wall of enemies barring our way.

“That’s why I secretly took lessons and practiced every single day!”

“Lessons?! Who taught you?!” Cedric asked.

They had to shout over the roar of the war raging all around us.

Princess Tiara ignored him. “All *you* ever do is make people look after you!” That left Cedric speechless, but Tiara pushed on. “You feel like crying all the time, so you go to my sister for help! And she rescues you! Then you do it again! You always wait for someone to save you! You baby! Big spoiled brat!” Her knives flew in all directions, but her sharp words had only one target.

It seemed Princess Tiara was attuned to the feelings of others, as she’d seen right through my little brother. When he ran off to Freesia, he came to rely on Princess Pride’s kindness. Apparently, he’d confessed everything to her, crying before her, taking her hand. Peculiar indeed...

“That’s why I hate you! You don’t deserve her!”

Princess Tiara was completely sick of Cedric, that much was clear. I observed all this thanks to the knights clearing out enemies around us and removing the danger that had been pressing in around me before Cedric and the princess arrived. The knights used blade and gun alike to take out our foes, as well as streams of fire and water that swept in thanks to some special powers. The group Cedric and Princess Tiara had brought along was small, but these Freesians were a force to be reckoned with, truly.

The princess breathed a quiet sigh of relief at the improving state of the battle. Then, as if casually recalling an item on her to-do list, she resumed berating my brother. Her resentment had clearly been building up for a long time.

“You don’t even know how to hold a sword! You’re so selfish! All you ever do is make people protect y—”

“Then let me get myself a sword,” Cedric interrupted.

His deep, clear tone cut over her delicate voice. She swiveled in her saddle to face him. Cedric was already holding a blade from who-knew-where, and he stood up in his saddle like he was about to jump.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Princess Tiara asked, her bewildered expression mirroring that of the knights behind her.

There was no way Cedric could dismount a horse the same way the knights did. Even if he could ride a horse on his own, Cedric didn't have experience dismounting at full gallop. Only Freesia's knights were capable of those mad jumps off their charging horses, but Cedric was clearly about to attempt it for himself. We couldn't possibly allow him to do something so reckless.

"Don't be stupid!" Princess Tiara shouted before I got a chance. "Sit down on your horse! You—"

Whoosh! Cedric ignored Princess Tiara's warning and leapt into the sky. Without the help of a special power, he couldn't get as high as the other knights. Even so, he soared gracefully over the men on the ground, landed on his feet, and immediately sliced through an enemy soldier. I knew this was the first time he'd ever used a sword in his life, yet he handled the weapon like an experienced knight.

He cut through enemy troops, neutralizing them in a blink and dodging their attacks as if he'd done this a million times before. Cedric dodged every counterattack, slipped in front of the soldiers, and plunged his sword into their bodies before they could react...just like Princess Pride had.

Before any enemies could fire their weapons at him, Cedric snatched the guns right out of their hands and fired back effortlessly. Anyone who rushed at him met the end of his blade, while those aiming to overpower him wound up on their back with their feet swept out from under them. Cedric pierced the gaps in their armor while they were still on the ground.

It was startling watching Cedric fly onto the battlefield—but it was even *more* astonishing how natural he looked in a fight. As impressive as it was, it was also a huge surprise. I wasn't the only one watching either. All the soldiers gaped at Cedric as he wove around and among them like they were an extension of his own body.

"I read it in a book!" Cedric said as he worked. "This is how you guys work together, right?!"

He flashed a devious smile at his baffled audience and pushed closer to where I fought up on the front lines.

"It was a lesson in a foreign book," he said. "If you want to take out the

general, take out his horse first!”

Cedric scooped up a rifle, then called out to a knight on the front lines.

“Scuse me! Can you send me flying like those other knights? I only want to get high enough to see where the enemies are.”

The knight was rattled by the unexpected request, but he agreed. When he touched Cedric, he cried out, “Here you go!” and hurled him into the air.

Cedric scanned the ground as he soared upward, counting the enemy or perhaps their horses. As he arced back toward the ground, the shots rang out.

Bang! Bang! Bang! With each of Cedric’s shots, a horse whinnied and collapsed, dragging its rider down with it. Even when he ran out of bullets, he simply reached into his jacket and retrieved four throwing knives to continue his assault. The sound of the passing gusts of wind was immediately followed by screams of the horses who collapsed to the ground along with the men on their backs.

The enemy’s formation was already breaking up by the time Cedric landed back on the ground safely. They hadn’t just lost their horses—they’d suffered even more damage from the struggle the horses put up before dying. There were no injuries to the Cercian or Freesian fighters around me, and injured and panicked enemies fled right into our waiting troops.

“Don’t waste this opportunity!” I shouted. “Now’s the time to put on the pressure!”

I dove into the fight, determined to make good use of the boon Cedric had granted us. Even as I launched into the battle, I couldn’t tear my eyes off my brother. Cedric, having reached the ground again, was clearing a path alongside the rest of the knights. When he shouted over his shoulder to Princess Tiara, he never so much as stumbled. Awe and respect dawned in the eyes of the knights fighting around him. They probably assumed he’d been honing these skills in secret for years, especially after what they’d heard from Yohan on an earlier broadcast.

But I knew the truth.

Cedric had truly never held a sword before in his life. He’d never learned how

to fire a rifle, nor even touched one before today. He'd never once studied military formations or self-defense practices.

There was no way Cedric should have been able to surpass real Cercian troops. I knew this better than anyone. He was even keeping up with the war-savvy Freesian knights.

Just before he raised his sword again to meet an oncoming enemy, I murmured to myself.

"God's child..."

"How do you know that name?"

King Yohan's eyes went wide when he heard me. Even Captain Alan and Captain Callum gaped at us in wonder. I understood why they were confused... and why King Yohan was so startled.

"God's child."

It was a term I had no reason to know. I couldn't tell His Majesty that I'd learned it through experiencing this world as an otome game, so instead I brushed it off as a premonition.

"I don't know when it will happen," I said. "I just know that at some point in the future, he'll come to accept that name for himself."

King Yohan's golden eyes went even wider, welling with emotion. "He will?" The king squeezed his lips together and shut his eyes as if he were praying.

Cedric Silva Lowell—the second-born prince, nicknamed "God's child." He was a prodigy capable of permanently memorizing everything he observed. He could absorb the knowledge and instantly use it to its full potential. That was why he had tried so hard to escape his studies. He wanted to abandon all knowledge to clear a path to the throne for his brother. It was his own choice to remain ignorant.

In the game, Cedric grew into a wonderful prince just one year after his tragedy took place. He'd spent his whole life refusing to study, yet it only took a year... No, he'd been supporting his country ever since King Lance fell into a

state of madness, growing into a prince along the way. It was all thanks to his abilities as “God’s child” that he’d refused to touch for all those years.

That was why I brought Cedric with me out of the castle. He was ready to make a change. Once we were out of the castle and Cedric had a chance to watch me and the knights battling up close, he would absorb our every move. As the man who crossed swords with Queen Pride in the game, I knew he could do it. Once he comprehended his own talents, he would gain self-confidence and a hidden weapon he could use to push into enemy territory.

In fact, at that very moment, he was...

“Wh-what was that?! How did you just...?!”

I watched Cedric from atop my horse, wide-eyed with disbelief. He fought among the other knights in perfect sync, sword in hand, looking like a completely new man from the coward who’d arrived in Freesia to beg for my big sister’s help. Now he fought so bravely I got distracted and had to rely on my knights to protect me while I stumbled.

“Which part?! The sword? The gun? Or the knives?!” he asked with a hearty laugh.

“All of it!” I snapped.

Cedric simply laughed again, plunging his sword into another enemy. “I learned it earlier! Pride and the knights put on a great show for me today with their swords and guns. I just copied what I saw!”

I was at a loss for words. He described learning how to fight simply by watching as though that was the most natural thing in the world. But that wasn’t how it worked at all. “Copied?! How did you—”

“I learned the knives from watching you, Tiara!” Cedric said, the excitement obvious in his voice.

His whirlwind of attacks continued as he fired his rifle at an enemy. The man collapsed the moment the shot cracked through the air.

“I’d never seen anyone use throwing knives before, but it’s kinda

inconvenient, huh? You lose all your weapons really fast! I like this better!”

He retrieved the dead man’s firearm. Then, with a gun in each hand, he spun in a circle, firing at the enemies sneaking up on me from behind. I pulled out a few more knives, but Cedric had already taken out every enemy.

“I don’t need your help!”

I had to resist the urge to fling a knife at Cedric. This was the first time I’d used them in front of others, and Cedric was criticizing my choice of weaponry? My face burned with heat.

“I still have plenty more where that came from!” I said, but Cedric just chuckled.

“They’re not all bad. Besides, you’re probably the only princess in the whole world who knows how to use throwing knives.”

“I don’t believe you! You never even left your country until a few days ago!”

“You’re right about that!” Cedric said, bringing up his sword again.

He stabbed his opponent, then ran to keep up with a group of advancing knights. It seemed like he was intentionally striking a second behind the rest of the knights, taking down any soldier hoping to get the jump on them. Cedric moved and fought with the power of three knights in one. When an enemy recoiled, he’d appear in a flash, slashing their head off in a single swipe.

“Tiara, you hate me, right?!”

As he claimed life after life with his own hands, this question made it sound like he wasn’t even giving the battle his full attention.

I swallowed at the question, then glared at him. “Yes! I hate you! I hate you for making my sister cry!”

“Ha ha! Is that right?! What else?!”

He sounded a bit like the king when he laughed like that. I sent five more knives flying into the enemy before announcing my complaints.

“You’re spoiled! You have no common sense or manners! You’re a crybaby! And you ate all the food we worked so hard on! Even the cookies! Those were

meant for people my sister cared about more than anyone! You big glutton! Stupid dummy!”

The flood of memories only left me more enraged, but behind me, Cedric was howling with laughter.

“What a coincidence!” he called back. “I always hated me for the same reasons!”

Slash! After cutting down two more foes, Cedric cast a glance back in my direction. Though blood ran down his sword and dripped from his cheeks, he cackled without an ounce of misery. I gaped at the man before me, such a drastic change from the man I’d first met.

An enemy held up his rifle to fire at Cedric, but I stopped him with a deadly knife hit before even the knights could react. Cedric had run out of breath, but he smiled over at me.

“I always wanted a beauty like Pride too,” he said.

My eyes went wide at the bluntness of his reply. Despite the dire situation around us, he looked up at me on my horse with nostalgia lighting his eyes. Just as he opened his mouth to speak again, however, his gaze flickered past me, over my shoulder.

“Those are bombs! Take cover!”

Everyone scattered for cover as bombs dropped from an unseen source. As soon as the knights moved to set up shields and lead the royalty away to safety, I sent some of my knives flying.

They shot upward with a *fwish*, sailing past the knights and toward the falling bomb. It might have looked like they just barely grazed their target, but I knew better, even as the soldiers around me gulped with fear.

The bombs fell, collided with the ground...and not a single one exploded. They simply emitted a dull thud, rolling away fecklessly.

I’d severed the lit fuses with my knives in midair. Their flames never reached the gunpowder inside, meaning there were now six large lumps of explosive powder sitting before us. Cutting off bomb fuses in midair was something only

special power users and a few members of the Eighth Squadron could achieve. I knew everyone would be staring at me in disbelief after that. For the first time in this war, we had a counter for those mysterious bombings.



“You’re not getting away!” Cedric shouted.

He charged through the knights who had fallen back to shield from the explosions, then roared up at the sky. He stomped up to a nearby knight, who cowered before the enraged prince, then pointed upward and uttered a command.

“Send me flying up there again! Get me as high as you can in the direction of two o’clock!”

“What do you think you’re doing?!” I shouted back.

Everyone was confused by this reckless plan, but Cedric just kept glaring upward like he could see something up in the sky.

“I’m gonna shoot down their blimp!” he said.

We might have taken this for a joke if it weren’t for the fury in his voice. But when we followed Cedric’s gaze, there was nothing in the sky—no blimp, no enemy, nothing.

Still, Cedric took a loaded gun and barked “Hurry!” at the knight before him with the special power. The knight reached out and touched him. Immediately, Cedric kicked off the ground with all his might, a boom shuddering through the ground as he soared skyward.

He must have remembered something from the transmissions that the rest of us had missed. But he was right; the bombs always fell from roughly the same height, the level at which the blimps were floating. Cedric had seen it up close. The bomb that was dropped directly over his head fell at a set speed, but from a different height. He must have remembered the height and speed of the enemy blimps as well as the trajectory of the dropped bombs. Though it was invisible, Cedric’s calculations led him directly to the blimp dropping the bombs on us.

“I can see it!” His voice was laced with rage, his eyes crimson fire. He shot straight for his destination, readying his gun. Then he unloaded every single bullet he had at his target.

The moment the shots ceased, the cries of shock began.

“How is it possible?! How could he?!”

“The blimp’s coming down!”

We could hear something deflating above us. Even as he fell back down to the ground, Cedric never took his eyes off that spot in the sky. We all followed his focused gaze.

Just then, a blimp appeared right where Cedric was looking.

It happened in a single second, quick as a blink. Holes had been punched through the blimp. The whole thing was deflating as screams rose from within the passenger compartment. It sounded like they were arguing as they crashed toward the ground.

The blimp hit the roof of a small church, then folded inward on itself. The deflated sack hung on the church’s cross while the passenger compartment hit the ground, sending a cloud of dust into the air.

Whomp! The ground shook from the impact. Cedric slowly rose to his feet, continuing to glare at the blimp. His blond hair was frizzy and wild from the jump.

“My name is Cedric Silva Lowell!”

Cedric’s words alone broke the silence from the Hanazuo soldiers, Freesian knights, and enemy troops.

“I’m Hanazuo’s royal brother!”

The light in his eyes burned red hot. I’d never seen Cedric like this. The man standing before me with his sword held high, the man who’d just single-handedly brought down a blimp, seemed more than human all of a sudden.

Cedric aimed his sword at the enemies surrounding his brother. “I’m not letting anyone lay a finger on my country again!”

It wasn’t just the enemy soldiers—even the Hanazuo troops, the knights, King Lance, and I myself gaped at Cedric, unable to tear our eyes off the man standing tall in front of the collapsed blimp. All on his own, he’d felled one of the blimps that had given our armies so much trouble.

Our foes couldn’t close their mouths. Even in the face of their own imminent demise, they had no will to lift their swords. That blimp was supposed to lead

them to victory.

The wrecked blimp fell still. Little by little, deep voices rose, until they suddenly surged together into a single cry.

“Yeaaaaah!”

It was a cry of victory from the knights. The blimp was neutralized. Everyone sprang into action, calling out orders.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of without those bombs! Take out every last one of their men!”

“Communication specialists! Send out a report! Tell everyone that Prince Cedric took out one of the invisible bombers! Inform all bases!”

“Second Squadron! Get to the wreck and capture any survivors!”

Our soldiers rushed in to claim the victory, overwhelming the enemy with their vigor.

“Don’t leave any survivors! They don’t get to take another step into our country!” Cedric raised his sword and cried out.

All the knights and soldiers roared with agreement and charged forward.

“Prince Cedric!” I called, stopping him before he could join the rest of the knights. He froze, turning to stare at me up on my horse. One second passed, then two. “Are you running off to be with King Lance?!”

The knight behind me dismounted the horse, seeming to offer his spot to Cedric, and stood with his sword raised to fight.

“Take the reins for me!” I urged Cedric.

“You got it!”

He ran toward my horse, sticking a foot in the stirrups to swing up into the saddle behind me. The horse whinnied and bucked, startled by the sudden weight, but it quickly regained its composure. Cedric snapped the reins I had handed over to him, sending us charging toward the front lines of the battle. Having watched me and my knight do this already, Cedric knew how to command the horse.

“All units! Follow King Lance’s men and clean up the last of the enemies!” he shouted.

“Freesian knights! Please provide them with backup!” I followed up.

The knights and soldiers cheered in response. They would continue to guard us, as always, but no longer did they see either of us as helpless royals in need of constant babysitting.

The United Hanazuo Kingdom and the second-born prince of Cercis, Cedric Silva Lowell.

The second-born princess of the kingdom of Freesia, Tiara Royal Ivy.

We were pillars of our kingdoms, wielding great power and commanding our nation’s soldiers with dignity.

The sight of us holding up our weapons proudly in defense of the king marked us unmistakably as the leaders of this victorious charge.

“This is the final push! All units, advance!” I shouted. The knights roared in response to a direct order from their commander.

On the northern front of the kingdom of Chinensis, we charged ahead on the few horses we had left, raising our swords and rifles. The First Squadron led the rest of the units straight for the waiting enemy soldiers to the north. Copelandii still had troops remaining, but the situation had completely reversed.

One general had been given total control of all the remaining enemy troops between Copelandii and the other two countries. He stood at the very rear of his army, but his hands were trembling—be it from fear or from rage, I couldn’t quite tell.

The enemy had used every trick at their disposal: sneak attacks with bombs, charging us in the pits, sacrificing slaves to lure us into a trap. They’d meant to kill most of us off with these tactics and take the headquarters in the north. Failing that, the craters should have kept myself and the order of knights I commanded at a disadvantage, buying the enemy time for more surprise bombings.

But not a single one of my men had fallen yet. Not even the large-scale bombing attacks had taken any of us down. We defended ourselves from the gunfire raining down from above, and even managed to fire back, despite the distance between us and the enemy.

Even if Copelandii managed to get their enslaved troops to put us in a pinch, I already had fresh knights ready to jump into the craters and save their comrades. For now, they remained on the lip, shooting at foes from a distance. Even when the bombings resumed, we suffered few injuries, and my knights refused to take the bait and jump down into the death waiting below.

Except for one knight, who dropped onto the battlefield out of nowhere. I was with him, plummeting toward the enemy general alongside this particular soldier. We overwhelmed the enemy and escaped with our injured knights in tow.

An explosion erupted. An earthquake rumbled. The land shifted before us.

The biggest of the craters filled with soil. The enemy general looked confused, like it was one of my troops with special powers doing this, but I wouldn't have waited so long to unleash such a tactic.

As the crater filled, it closed the gap between the knights and Copelandii's forces. The knights charged, running even faster when no bombs or explosions flared up to impede them.

"D-don't retreat!" the general from Copelandii shouted at his terrified troops. "Overwhelm them with your numbers! Ten of you can take out one knight each!"

Copelandii had a huge advantage in terms of sheer numbers. But if they charged straight at my knights, who hadn't suffered a single death, it was clear which side would fall first. Everyone knew the odds, from me to the enemy general to the soldiers on both sides. No matter how many men the enemy threw at us, they'd do little but stain our white uniforms with Copelandii blood.

My men fired from unreasonable distances and leapt unfathomably high, then cut down their foes with superhuman speed and accuracy. Bursts of fire and water followed—unnatural powers humans shouldn't have possessed. We were a monstrous surge of force, our ordinary fighting ability as overwhelming

as our special powers.

The enemy finally understood that they weren't going to wipe us out. Worse, this was the bulk of their forces, their main thrust. They were about to lose their front lines without invading the country.

The only cards they had yet to play were a full retreat...or they could go for me.

"Don't be scared!" the general screamed. "Aim for their commander! Take out the head! They may be monsters, but we'll be victorious if we take out their leader!"

Despite being the target of this new aggression, I understood the general's decision. He couldn't retreat. Failure wasn't an option, not now that he'd been given the honor of being put in charge. If he failed, a death far more terrifying than a simple execution awaited him.

With this order from their leader, the enemy focused single-mindedly on me. Their goal wasn't victory anymore—it was stopping our momentum. They focused all of their efforts on this one simple line of thinking. And on me.

"Aim for his head! Get their commander!"

The enemy soldiers shouted out their aims. They fought desperately, using swords, rifles, and fists against Dad—the commander of the knights.

"Not on my watch!" I said.

I kicked off the ground, spinning in the air like a tornado, and used the momentum to whip my sword out in every direction. Blood sprayed from enemies the moment I hit the ground.

I wasn't alone in this effort. The First and Second Squadrons surrounded Dad, holding up their swords to protect him. The enemy had no hope of overwhelming us. I greeted each foe with my sword, then spun to send others flying back with a kick. I finished off yet another with a bullet. Still, they pressed onward.

Dad, the First and Second Squadrons, and I valiantly slayed the enemies at the

front lines of the battle. We were cutting a path forward to the enemy general at the very back.

“You’ve got numbers, all right, but that’s it!” Vice Captain Eric yelled.

He was leading his squadron in Captain Alan’s absence. With his left hand, he fired a bullet at a foe; with his right, he plunged his sword into the man. He and his subordinates took down soldier after soldier, letting out fearsome war cries as they did. The knights of the Second Squadron circled me and Dad, clearing out enemies in our blind spot.

“Don’t get outpaced by the First Squadron!”

“It’s not just the enemy soldiers!” Dad shouted back. “Don’t let your guards down! Watch out for more bombings too!”

A swarm of enemies struggled to reach Dad in particular. He blocked hits from two swords with his arms, thanks to his special power. The very next moment, he punched an attacking soldier in the face to send him sprawling backward.

The knights cheered at Dad’s orders. He held his sword at the sky, urging his troops on. The First and Second Squadrons spread out on either side of him like wings, slaying, slicing, and mowing down any enemy they encountered. Behind them, more knights from other units followed as reinforcements, never stopping for a single second.

Except during the occasional volleys of enemy gunfire, that is.

“Incoming!”

Knights from the Sixth and Seventh Squadrons called out reports from atop their horses. Riflemen were taking aim from farther back in the enemy lines, hiding behind their own soldiers. Knights threw up shields to protect themselves from the gunmen.

Loud bangs erupted around us, the noise melding into one terrific roar. Although the bullets didn’t hit any of us, they did finally stop us in our tracks.

A few knights who’d been standing at the back—those with special powers to resist gunfire—stepped to the front. They raced straight up to the enemy riflemen and cut them down where they stood. Their special powers meant that

bullets would merely bounce off of them, making them a double threat to the firing enemies.

The enemy had sent out squadrons of riflemen many times now, always hiding them behind other soldiers so they could fire at us. Most of their shots were aimed at Dad, the commander of the order. Maybe they targeted Dad because he was our leader, or maybe they did it because swords and blades were ineffective against him. Either way, they made no attempt to hide their plot, which only served to enrage me and the knights more. We redoubled our efforts to protect our commander, refusing to let the enemy get anywhere near him. The knights behind Dad protected him with their shields anytime gunshots cracked out.

It seemed like the enemy had abandoned all methods of attack but surprise volleys of bullets. The knights at the front lines hopped off their horses, whose numbers had already dwindled after the first round of bombs. The elites of the Fifth and Sixth Squadrons used the horses as a strategic barrier to hide behind and provide covering fire from.

Normally, only the commander and captains used horses. But with the enemy trying to launch sneak attacks with gunfire, being on horseback just made you an easier target. On their feet, the knights could dodge incoming bullets, and some could deflect them with their swords and shields.

“There’s less gunfire than before! We’re almost there!” I called out to Vice Captain Eric.

He stabbed a nearby enemy before mercilessly slashing the throats of two more surrounding him.

At first, we had to stop constantly to wait out the rounds of fire from enemy riflemen, but every time we paused, it gave the knights invulnerable to gunfire time to press forward and clear out as many riflemen as they could. At this rate, we weren’t sure if we would reach the back of the enemy lines or take out the last of their riflemen first.

“I told you not to let your guard down, Arthur!” Vice Captain Eric said. “They’re bad with guns, but anyone can shoot! Don’t get cocky!”

I nodded my agreement. Dad and I fought on either side of Vice Captain Eric,

doing our best to keep up with him. He watched us, a flicker of amazement in his eyes.

Dad was on the right; I was on the left. Over and over, I caught Vice Captain Eric watching us instead of paying attention to the enemy. I wondered how I measured up against Dad in his eyes. Everyone respected their commander, but I felt like my reflexes and speed were just a tiny bit faster.

“No one’s better than me with a sword.”

I’d said that almost two weeks ago. I wasn’t trying to act tough or be a sore loser. I was simply that confident that I could back up that claim.

Vice Captain Eric, Captain Alan, and Captain Callum knew I’d started sparring with Dad at the order training ground after joining the main forces. Before, we’d just sparred at home. They never knew who won, nor did they ever ask. This battle right now was the first glimpse any of them had gotten of me and Dad fighting at the same time. Perhaps this would be enough for them to finally believe I’d landed a hit or two on him in the past.

Just as enemy troops aimed their guns at the knights, Vice Captain Eric fired back at their hands. He seemed shaken—not by the enemies, but by me.

A trigger clicked. It wasn’t the enemies before us, however. We both whirled toward the sound. An enemy soldier lay on the ground at Dad’s feet, refusing to take his final breaths and pointing his weapon at our commander.

Vice Captain Eric didn’t have time to yell. He clumsily grabbed Dad’s uniform and pulled him backward. The momentum sent him stumbling forward in return.

Bang! Bang! Two gunshots rang out. Everyone seemed to hold their breath. That first bang was Vice Captain Eric, not the enemy. He’d hit the enemy soldier right in the head as he switched places with Dad.

The second shot formed a growing red stain on Vice Captain Eric’s side.

“Augh!”

The shot had been fired from close enough range to pierce his armor. Vice Captain Eric clutched at his side, fell to his knee, and lowered to the ground. We

all started shouting his name. Had Dad or the Second Squadron failed to finish the enemy off before he took his cheap shot at Vice Captain Eric? Or had he pretended to be dead the whole time, waiting for the opportunity to strike?

The knights behind Vice Captain Eric surged forward to protect him as he clutched at his bleeding wound. A few took his place on the front lines, raising their swords, while others rushed to apply first aid. Dad, having been saved by Vice Captain Eric, gritted his teeth and jumped back into the fight without a moment's hesitation. He clutched his sword, cutting into another enemy and refusing to look at what was happening behind him. When the next enemy aimed his gun at Dad, he shot the foe down first, focusing all of his attention on staying in formation.

More enemy riflemen appeared. "Incoming!" a knight shouted. As soon as Dad sped up to dodge the bullets, he noticed me slowing down.

Arthur Beresford—the youngest vice captain in history. Everyone was finally recognizing my talents. I was the youngest man to ever join the main forces of the order, and I never once missed a day of training. I even spent time outside of official knight activities to practice sparring with Stale, Dad, Gilbert, Captain Alan, Captain Callum, and Vice Captain Eric. After joining the Eighth Squadron, fending off surprise attacks from Captain Harrison became part of my daily routine. The strength of the Freesian royal order was well known throughout the world, and ever since I joined, we hadn't suffered a single death among our ranks.

Even in such a fearsome order of knights, I was promoted to vice captain of the Eighth Squadron. I knew I was a strong warrior, as well as the youngest person to become a vice captain. It wasn't an exaggeration to say the lack of deaths since I joined was partially my doing. There were troops with special powers in areas like medical treatment, but the sheer toughness of the knights had also improved.

Due to all this, I'd never before watched a friend collapse from a war wound. I'd seen knights get injured many times before, but not once had I witnessed a knight getting shot right before my eyes—a knight I considered a close friend, at that.

Vice Captain Eric was standing at my side when the bullet came out of nowhere. He'd saved Dad's life, but I only realized what happened after he'd already yanked Dad out of harm's way and collapsed on the ground himself. When Vice Captain Eric had pointed his gun at the enemy, Dad collided with me, that fateful shot rang out, and my fellow vice captain fell to his knees.

I could hardly process it all. I managed to wield my sword and follow Dad's lead, but I was running out of steam. Cutting down enemies was like a reflex, so I could continue doing it even while my mind whirled.

Oh, Vice Captain Eric... I didn't even realize the enemy was aiming at Dad. Vice Captain Eric was losing...so much blood.

My thoughts remained frozen on the image of my bloodied friend.

Vice Captain Eric wouldn't die from an injury like that. The knights of the Seventh Squadron were right behind us. He would live thanks to their first aid treatment. Nevertheless, I had a hard time getting my thoughts in order as I kept up the fight.

"Incoming!" someone shouted, and I sped up to dodge a hail of gunfire. I'd evaded this type of thing so many times today, but in that moment, my body couldn't keep up. It was too late.

Several guns cocked all at once. I was still clutching my sword, but my body had gone completely still. Behind me, the knights reached out to pull me out of the way.

"Arthur!"

Dad jumped in front of me before the enemy could take advantage of my stillness. Of all people, the commander of the order was the one putting himself in harm's way to protect me without so much as a shield to cover himself with. My eyes flew wide as Dad rushed in front of me. I reached toward Dad at the same moment the enemy pulled their triggers.

Clang!

A metallic sound rang out—something being smacked away.

The entire battlefield went silent.

“Arthur...?”

It wasn't just Dad uttering those dazed words; several of the knights mumbled my name as well. They weren't staring at their commander, who had jumped in front of the bullets. Rather, they stared at me. I leaned forward, sword in hand, drawing the attention of every eye.

“I did it...”

Still-smoking bullets lay on the ground before me. Only Dad was close enough to hear my murmured astonishment. I was just as surprised as anyone else by what I'd done. Fortunately, the others recovered quicker than me. Dad and the knights dragged me back from the front lines and out of immediate danger, fresh knights leaping in to clear the path ahead as new riflemen rushed in to fire on them.

“Hey! Arthur! Arthur!” Dad shouted, shaking me by the shoulders.

Members of the Seventh Squadron rushed up, asking if we were injured. I blinked, shaking myself out of my stupor, and turned to Dad.

“Wh-what the hell're you doing, Commander?!” I yelled.

I leaned forward, like I was about to grab Dad by the collar, and brought my face close enough our noses almost touched. Dad looked too startled to be angry for now. His eyes went wide as he uttered a confused “Huh?!” The nearby knights were just as startled by my anger, but it was obvious we were unharmed, so they left us to get back to the front lines, leaving the Fourth Squadron to take over for them.

“Why the hell would the commander jump in front of me?!” I snarled. “You covered for me?! Don't you know how bad things would be if you got shot?!”

My whole face was getting hotter as I shouted loudly enough to drown out the cries of the knights and enemy soldiers clashing on the battlefield around us. Surely my blue eyes had turned red with fury.

Dad must have realized that what he'd done was wrong. Maybe he'd jumped out in front of me on instinct, but that didn't make it right.

Under normal circumstances, Dad probably would have told me not to let my

guard down or to let someone else's injury serve as my motivation to take on more enemies, but the rage clear on my face kept him from responding. Instead, I was the one gritting my teeth and calling to the knights around us, "I'm not hurt! I'm going back to the front lines!"

"Arthur! Hang on!" Dad called without thinking, but I was already on my feet and running. Dad rushed to follow, but by the time we both made it back to the front lines, the special power troops had finished cleaning up the riflemen and were already falling back.

"What the hell would I do if you died?!" I cried out in pain when I realized Dad was right there behind me.

I glared at the enemies, refusing to look back at my father. I slashed through two soldiers at once and used the momentum to launch into the air. Before the fatally wounded men could even collapse, I kicked another soldier behind them, twisting my body backward as I dragged my sword through him.

I've had enough of these feelings. The ache in my chest sent me back to that moment six years ago.

Dad cut down an enemy in front of him, raised his sword, and plunged it into the belly of another. But he wore a strange expression thanks to my screaming at him. He probably never expected a lecture from his own son, but more than that, he knew I was right.

"I can't have the commander dyin' on me!"

I blocked two attacks at once, grabbed one man's arm, and used my long legs to kick the other one away. Dad swept aside an enemy's sword with one hand and fired on another one taking aim at him. Wrinkles creased his brow. He grasped the arm of a soldier who came flying at him and tossed the man back into the cluster of enemies, taking up his sword again and plunging it into all of them at once.

In my loudest shout yet, I said, "I need my dad to live!"

I knew it was a bit of a shock to call him my "dad" and not my "commander" in a setting like this, but I ignored that and pressed on, keeping my gaze fixed on the scene ahead of me. One step after another, I moved forward, slicing deeper

into enemy territory. When I couldn't reach someone, I picked up swords off the corpses at my feet and threw them through anyone in my path. The enemy formation weakened as I cut down so many of their brethren right before their eyes. The knights followed up after me, seizing on the opportunity I created.

Just then, enemy riflemen appeared behind our forces once more.

"Incoming!" a knight at the rear cried out, but this time, the enemies weren't aiming for the knights nearby or their commander. Their guns were fixed on me and me alone—the man shoving their whole line back one slash at a time.

I had no intention of stopping. If anything, this was just another challenge to conquer. I ran straight at those enemy riflemen. The knights behind me must have been shocked; they yelled for me to stop, but Dad didn't, not this time. I picked up speed as a series of loud bangs cracked.

"I need my dad to live so he can see...the moment I become the next commander!"

Clang!

A metallic clang sounded. Not a single bullet reached me or the knights. The moment I lowered my sword, I charged forward and cut down the riflemen, kicking their guns away and jabbing them in the face with my elbows. To many, it must have looked like those bullets they shot at me had simply vanished. But I was sure Dad and the knights at the front line knew better.

They'd seen me cut those bullets right out of the air with my sword. It wasn't the same as calculating the path the bullets would take in order to block them. In the very second that fire erupted from the barrels of those guns, I'd deflected each and every bullet. They clattered harmlessly to the ground, warped and split into halves.

I'd spent the last six years sparring with Stale, who possessed the special power of teleportation. Prime Minister Gilbert taught me advanced martial arts so I could protect myself in close-quarters combat. On top of that, I trained regularly with some of the finest swordsmen in the order: Dad, Captain Alan, Captain Callum, and Vice Captain Eric. Ever since I joined the Eighth Squadron, surprise attacks from Captain Harrison became an everyday occurrence. My formal training over all these years also involved dueling with knights who

made use of speed-based special powers.

Stale and Prime Minister Gilbert helped cultivate my speed and force. Dad and the knights nurtured my sword skills. Captain Harrison improved my reflexes and ability to track projectiles. All of that combined to make me who I was today.

The time it took for the riflemen to aim and pull their triggers was slower than any of the attacks I'd practiced with Prime Minister Gilbert and Captain Alan in even closer quarters. Their approaching bullets were slower than Captain Harrison's nimble legs. The second it took the projectiles to reach my sword was a second longer than it took Stale to teleport.

My sword was easily fast enough to deflect every bullet.

"Go ahead. Keep shootin'," I muttered.

In a flash, I slit the throats of every enemy soldier around me. I stared dead ahead, ignoring the fresh blood staining my hair.

A gun cocked at my side. I glared at the enemy soldier an instant before he fired, and again I caught every shot with my blade. Then I drew the gun on my hip and shot down the foes all around me.

When a soldier tried to run at me with his sword raised, I grabbed his arm, yanked him up, and stole his weapon. I plunged it into one of his fellow soldiers, who was charging me from behind. To the enemy, it must have looked like every man they sent at me burst into a gout of blood with no warning.

Another enemy ran at me head-on. I met him with a punch to the jaw, knocking the man unconscious. He toppled backward into his comrades, bowling them over. When another soldier charged, I jumped up and stomped on his face. The momentum sent me flying backward. I flipped through the air to land right beside the knights on the front lines. Then I returned to Dad, who was still taking down enemies with the rest of the knights.

Dad blocked a slash from an enemy, sent him flying backward, and pierced the foe with his blade. Then he charged forward, felling more enemies as he went. He fended them off with ease, but I could feel him watching me as I took down ten men at a time with a single strike.

“Commander.” Even as I wreaked havoc on the battlefield, my call emerged strangely timid.

“Yes?”

I narrowed my eyes, embracing all the anger inside me. Dad shuddered when he saw that look. I could almost *feel* the flames burning in my light eyes.

“I’m gonna cut through all of them now,” I declared.

I gripped my sword in both hands, glaring off into the distance before bracing myself against the ground. While members of the Eighth Squadron always acted independently, I wasn’t giving a simple report. This was far more than that. Dad looked like he might interrupt, but I held my position, taking out anyone who approached. One after another, men fell at my feet.

“Soldiers, swords, bullets—I’m not gonna let any of ’em stand in my way.”

Understanding dawned in Dad’s eyes at last. He finally understood that I was sick of waiting around for riflemen to take cheap shots at us. If I could simply deflect the bullets with my sword...

“Their leader’s at the very back of their camp. I’m gonna go to him now,” I said.

With a glower, I focused far ahead on the general commanding the enemies at a distance. I couldn’t literally see him, but that didn’t matter. I offered Dad one final smile over my shoulder, a taunting grin he’d seen plenty of times before. I even bared my teeth in my excitement, my chest still heaving from exertion.

“You’re coming too, right, Commander?” I asked.

Dad realized something then: he’d heard me ask this before, the first time I showed up here to fight on the front lines.

“Will you join me, Commander?”

I was telling him that I still had more fight left in me. Thrill and anger warred on Dad’s face as he took in the sight of his son on the battlefield.

“Who do you think you’re asking?” he challenged me, just as before.

He knocked an approaching enemy's sword out of his hand, grabbed the man's head, and slammed it down against his knee, knocking him unconscious. The crack of the man's skull made me wince in sympathy. As Dad sent more enemies flying, an enthusiastic grin broke across his face.

It was the same devious smile as mine.

"Of course I'm coming," Dad said.

It was my turn to be startled. I'd never seen my father smile like this before. I fought off enemies without even looking, gaping at Dad instead. Our matching blue eyes locked.

Dad didn't waver when he met my astonished expression. He raised his arm as high as it would go, then smacked me on the back. I could feel the impact through my armor as Dad urged me onward.

"Get going, Arthur Beresford," he said.

Even in the midst of an intense battle, Dad encouraged me to march on. I straightened up, buoyed by fresh resolve. Dad chuckled, seeing through it to the nerves beneath. He patted me more softly on the back this time, and my tense muscles relaxed. The next time he urged me forward, I was ready, and kicked off the ground with all the power I could muster.

"I'll be right there behind you."

"Right!"

Dad's fighting spirit filled me, propelling me forward as fast as I could go.

"We're charging straight ahead! Don't let your formation fall apart!"

I ran.

"Third Squadron, Fourth Squadron, protect the front lines! First and Second Squadrons, follow Arthur and Commander Roderick!"

I plunged my sword into an enemy and sent him flying out of my path.

"Riflemen, dismount your horses and join the charge! Don't pass Arthur!"

With each step, more and more enemies appeared to challenge me. I cut 'em all down. When they surrounded me, the knights at my back cleared them out

with swords and rifles. It was like the entire order was a single blade.

“All units, support Arthur!”

I was at the tip of that blade—and even I couldn’t really believe it. I blocked enemy blows and kicked them away before they could fight back. Gunshots popped behind me as the knights cleaned up the men I’d cast aside.

A man hiding behind the enemy soldiers dove at me with his sword out. Dad grabbed the blade with his bare hand, yanking both it and the enemy toward him. Just as he went flying past me, I heard a pained scream.

“Incoming!” Dad yelled.

A group of riflemen were readying their guns behind the enemy army. The more foot soldiers we cut down, the clearer a view we had of these riflemen. A trigger clicked and I leapt forward, closed the distance between us, and raised my sword. *Bang! Bang! Bang!* Gunfire rang out. I wasn’t sure if this was intentional or if they were really just that bad at aiming. Either way, I knocked down the bullets before they could do any harm. I couldn’t let them hit any of the knights at my back.

I kept going, taking out the next round of bullets too until I was close enough to jump forward and cut into the riflemen. Their faces drained of color as I closed the distance between us. Then red stained their skin as I cut through them.

“Don’t go any farther ahead than that!” Dad called.

“Uh-huh, sure.”

I understood his cry for caution, but I had to take out these riflemen before they could actually get a good shot off. I rushed ahead on my own. Meanwhile, Dad and the First and Second Squadrons took care of all the soldiers on the left and right so I could focus on what lay in front of us.

The enemies charged with swords and spears raised, like they were ready to break themselves against us like a crashing wave, hoping to take down something with their reckless charge. Dad swept in front of me, using his special power to block their hits, then cut them away with a slash of his sword. Blood sprayed into the air. Some of the enemies took out guns, but Dad chopped the

weapons out of their hands and ended things with his fists.

After this display, I almost wanted to give Dad the lead, but he just stepped back, patted me on the shoulder, and said, “You’re the only one who can clear a path for us.”

I can see where he’s coming from, I thought.

Thus, I pressed forward toward the enemy soldiers, taking down anyone in my way so I could keep running forward. I got so lost in the pattern of run, slash, run, slash that I didn’t even realize I was charging ahead full speed until I stopped to look behind me.

“What’s wrong, Arthur?! Captain Alan’s a lot faster than that!” shouted a senior knight from the First Squadron, sounding mirthful. Not only were the more experienced knights keeping up, but it also looked like they still had plenty of vigor left in them. As always, I had to be impressed.

The enemy riflemen tried to regroup, but in their haste, their gunfire rang out in a disorganized jumble. We must have taken out their real riflemen already, leaving only panicking scrubs. I dashed in with my sword, and they fired wildly without even aiming. I met the bullets with my sword, cutting them down even as they cried out “Monster!” In truth, I didn’t mind being called the same thing as *her*.

More and more enemies collapsed before I could even reach them as the knights behind me took them out with guns and special powers. I plucked another sword from one of the men on the ground, not liking the idea of being beaten, and flung it at the men in front of me.

Then I ran, and ran, and ran, and ran, and ran.

They were starting to fling more bombs at us. We must have been getting closer to their main headquarters. I couldn’t decide if I should hide behind the shields of the knights at my back, or try to take out the bombs with my sword, but then someone shot a spray of water with their special power. It extinguished the lit fuses of the bombs, sending the damp projectiles harmlessly to the ground.

“What the hell’re you doing?! We outnumber them! Charge! *Charge*, I say!”

the enemy general screeched from their rear lines.

I couldn't see him yet, but I could hear him just ahead. There was a long row of riflemen—or rather, soldiers—blocking our path, but that wouldn't hold up for long.

They spread out into a wide line. If I pressed any farther, I would be too close to take out their gunfire with just one sword. I halted, waiting for the hail of gunfire, then whipped my sword around to intercept the bullets. I clenched my teeth, incapable of getting any closer if I wanted to deflect the gunfire.

“Go get 'em!” Dad yelled.

A few knights with powers capable of blocking gunfire jumped out from behind me. As shots rang out, they charged forward, swords in hand, and cut down as many riflemen as they could while I worked on deflecting stray bullets. The knights picked up the fallen enemies' weapons and fired back. They picked off one enemy soldier after another from each end of the line. Once their numbers started to dwindle, I took off running again. The knights remained behind me in a line, keeping up with my pace.

“We can only stop ourselves from getting hit with bullets,” one of them yelled as he ran beside me, reaching out for a quick pat on my shoulder. “Don't let your guard down, and be careful of the bullets we deflect!”

I nodded before taking off at an even faster sprint. I cut down, kicked aside, shot, and slashed anyone standing in my way.

Finally, I pointed the tip of my sword at the general in the very back of the enemy lines. A ring of armed guards surrounded him.

“It's over,” I said.

The general's guards held up their swords and rifles, but their arms trembled as they instinctively stepped away from me. Their leader stood behind them, his face and throat bright red and pulsing. He glared at us and ground his teeth. The knights with me plunged forward and wiped out the guards before they could even react.

The knights aimed the guns they grabbed off the dead bodies at the general. He cowered, turning his face away, and barked at anyone around him to come

save him, but it was too late—we were surrounding him. The First Squadron formed a circle around him, while the Second Squadron protected their backs.

Our commander stepped forward, joining me at the very front of the line.

“Surrender and withdraw all the troops you brought in from Copelandii, Alata, and Rafflesiana,” Dad said. “If you refuse to leave Hanazuo, which is an ally of our homeland, Freesia, then we’ll have no choice but to—”

“Kill me.”

The general cut Dad off and glared up at him with bloodshot eyes. His shoulders heaved as he drew a deep breath.

“I’d rather have you kill me here than send me back to my homeland for punishment. But remember this...”

He set his jaw, nostrils flaring as he exhaled. The next instant, he was screaming loud enough to send spittle flying.

“You bastards are going to die an even worse death than us! I don’t care that you’re some huge country of monsters! You’ll die with hatred for your foolish ruler who ever thought to make an enemy of the Rajah Empire!”

Dad arched his eyebrow at the desperate tirade. He sighed and held up his sword. The sweating general started to laugh, disregarding the knights all around him. In a final act of defiance, he twisted his mouth into a creepy, toothy grin.

“You people will *wish* you’d been turned into a colony.”

The general’s smile stretched even further, like he was reveling in some private victory. He reached into his breast pocket, ignoring all warnings from the knights. Just as he stuck his hand inside...

Bang!

I knocked down the bullet with my sword at the exact same time Dad plunged his blade forward.

The general slumped to the ground. My arm was still outstretched from taking down the bullet, and Dad glanced over at me, then turned his gaze toward all the knights around him.

Then he raised his sword up to the heavens in a declaration of victory.

“Hooraaaaah!”

I joined the knights in their victorious cries. I raised my sword and shouted with all my might, loud enough for the whole country to hear. It felt like my throat might split, but that didn’t matter as long as all of the remaining enemies lost their will to fight.

Clack. Clack. Clank. All around, enemies dropped their weapons. The knights leapt into action, issuing orders to set up communication specialists and report this back to Freesia, as well as apprehend the surrendering soldiers. Dad reminded them all not to let their guard down as they worked.

The war was over.

“We did it,” I said. “Princess Pride! Stale! We did it!”

I squeezed the sword in my hand, refusing to put it away just yet, and gazed into the distance. The roars of the knights drowned out my quiet declaration. But I just stood there, looking up at the sky, and smiled.

“Hooraaaaah!”

The victory cry from our troops rippled through the northern front like a tsunami. All of the knights who’d weathered the final enemy charge—including the Third and Fourth Squadrons—howled up at the sky with their swords raised as more and more enemies dropped their weapons and fell to their knees.

“Can you hear me, Vice Captain Eric?! Our forces were victorious! The defensive war is over!”

Amid all the cheering, knights from the Seventh Squadron tried to update me from where I was, at the very rear of our forces. They spoke as loud as they could, doing their best not to jostle me as they treated my wounds. Another member of the Seventh Squadron rushed in with more news.

“Report, sir!” he said. “Our knights have emerged victorious! All enemy soldiers have surrendered, and Commander Roderick and Vice Captain Arthur charged straight to the front lines where they—”

“I can hear you,” I said. I was crouched on the ground, covering my half-open eyes with the backs of my hands. My voice emerged quiet, as though I were asleep, but I smiled through the fog. “You did it... Arthur...”

I could hardly speak, but I soaked up the frantic reports coming from the knights. I knew all about how Commander Roderick, the First and Second Squadrons, and Vice Captain Arthur had led the charge into enemy territory.

“Your wounds are stabilized for the time being, sir! How are you feeling?”

I simply waved in response to the knight. Getting that bullet out of my body had been so painful I thought I might die from that alone, but thanks to the work of knights with special powers in the medical field, the blood loss had stopped and I was still conscious. I wished I could return to the battle, but I was extremely grateful to the Seventh Squadron for saving my life.

I wonder if Captain Alan will be upset.

As soon as it sank in that the war really was over, that silly thought crossed my mind. I burned with shame that I hadn’t accompanied the First Squadron as their vice captain in their very moment of victory.

Knights gathered around me once they realized I could speak, peering curiously at my injuries.

“We’re just glad you’re alive.”

“You saved Commander Roderick.”

“You’re always so impressive, Vice Captain Eric.”

“This victory is thanks to your work, Vice Captain.”

“I bet Captain Alan will be so thrilled.”

“It’s easy to see why you were made vice captain of the First Squadron.”

Finally, the captain of the Seventh Squadron spoke up too. “You did well. Now rest up.”

I smiled awkwardly at the order.

“Vice Captain, would you like me to treat the scar as well?” one of the Seventh Squadron knights asked, seeming encouraged by my smile.

This knight could erase all battle scars thanks to his special power. He probably hesitated to commence with additional treatment without my permission, but this mark was one I would wear for the rest of my life. It was a mark of honor for protecting my commander.

“Nah, leave it there,” I said. “Keep it as clear as you can, thanks.” I smiled wider, touching the bandages around my middle. They would help me heal, but also preserve that little mark of distinction I’d earned on the battlefield.

“Arthur and I... Were we vindicated?” I asked, the words slipping from my mouth.

No one responded—there was nothing they could say. I knew that as well as anyone. At length, they asked me to explain. I simply chuckled and said I was just talking to myself. Then my heavy eyelids finally drooped shut.

I didn’t care whether they replied or not. Either way, I knew one thing for sure...

“The commander was trapped under the boulder, so he stayed behind to buy time for us to escape.”

I’d finally obtained the medal of honor that I’d wanted so very desperately six years ago.

“A-are you all right?! Please, snap out of it!” I called out, still in a daze myself.

At my back, Captain Alan and Captain Callum were also staring with wide eyes. My two imperial knights had been trembling ever since they heard Commander Roderick announce through the transmission that our Freesian forces were victorious—all because of King Yohan.

As soon as I heard the report, I asked His Majesty for permission to inform all of Chinensis and begin sending reinforcements. The king’s eyes were wide. He sat still and numb, unresponsive to words, like he couldn’t fathom what he’d heard. He gripped the cross around his neck with a quivering hand while his mouth hung open. I wondered if he even forgot how to breathe.

“King Yohan?” I tried.

Slowly, he gestured toward his soldiers. "Troops...the bell..." he muttered, voice shaking. They bowed and rushed out of the room. King Yohan's hand fell limply back down on the back of the sofa.

"We..."

He might have said more than that, but I couldn't understand his mumbling. I called his name again. The king turned toward me, his white hair rustling, and gave me a perplexed look. A few seconds later, a flush crept into his pale skin. He finally closed his mouth sharply, and his thin eyeglasses clouded up. The next moment, tears poured down his cheeks, running from behind his glasses and reflecting the golden light of his eyes.

"Your Majesty?!"



He rose suddenly from the sofa. I reached out to him. But I couldn't walk with my legs so gravely injured, so my hand passed uselessly through the air in his wake.

King Yohan rushed to the window in a flurry. His soldiers followed, just to be safe, and waited anxiously behind him. The sun set behind the nearby town, bathing it in rosy hues that brought more tears to his eyes. A breeze blew in from the broken window, caressing his white hair. He reached out through the window, as though something on the horizon lay just out of his grasp, and gripped the frame.

“...ance...dric...”

The king stared out the window, leaning through it, and cried out two strangled words. He appeared to be looking for someone, his eyes darting to and fro. When he shook his head, his tears fell free to roll down his face.

I thought about saying his name again but decided against it. Clearly he was struggling to believe we'd actually achieved victory here when all had seemed lost. He'd likely surrendered all hope long before we got that report from the commander.

King Yohan had given up entirely only two days earlier, that I understood. Thanks to King Lance's recovery and Cedric's persuasive words, King Yohan resolved to stand up before his people...but I knew it wasn't that easy to undo so much time spent mentally bracing for failure. He had only been king for two years, after all.

When I thought back on it, perhaps the blood oath he took with me only heaped added pressure on him. Still, he stood on his own two feet and battled back the fear. All this time, he never once turned his eyes away from the war. He even sent his best friend, King Lance, and the man he saw as a little brother, Prince Cedric, out onto the battlefield. It was only natural to cling to fear, pain, and doubt in such circumstances—as well as a desire to flee the castle entirely. He'd been carrying all of this the whole time, long before Freesia came into the picture, yet he held firm and stood resolute to face the conclusion of this war.

Abruptly cut loose from the responsibilities of a king at war, at least for the moment, he laced his shaking fingers together. Leaning his elbows on the

windowsill, he hung his head toward those folded hands and prayed to God.

King Yohan's hands shook and his handsome, feminine features contorted as tears rolled down his cheeks. His whole face was tense, giving him a harsher and more masculine look than I'd ever seen on him. He murmured too quietly for me to catch over the wind. It didn't look like even his nearby soldiers could hear him either.

I hated the fact that my legs prevented me from approaching him and placing my hand on his shoulder. At the same time, King Yohan seemed to need this moment to himself. It wasn't just that he was higher than me in status due to being a king. Rather, there was something deeply sacred and divine about seeing a king pray to God like this.

The people of Freesia weren't very religious. We celebrated special powers as the divine will of God, including the royal family's precognition, but we had almost no religious customs or beliefs like those in Chinensis. But just for now, I decided to lace my fingers together to imitate the king. I didn't pray, but I did make a wish, staring straight at the king's back.

May this country's god continue to be with the people. May everyone and everything who has supported this man continue to stand with just as much strength.

After a few moments, a bell chimed. We raised our heads and listened to the beautiful tone. It rang out with a heavy, solemn clang, but a light chiming joined each swing and left me shuddering. The bell belonged to the church attached to the Chinensian castle; they must've been ringing it because of King Yohan's orders.

The king had remained completely still up to this moment, but now he shuddered violently. His shoulders slumped, almost as if he'd actually heard the voice of God ringing in his ears. Even from afar, I could see how tightly he squeezed his fingers together. A choked sob snuck out over the sound of the bell, betraying his deep longing. He'd waited fearfully for this moment, believing it would never arrive.

The largest bell in the largest church in the country was ringing out. It would inform everyone that the war really was over. To me, that bell sounded like it

was singing a song of freedom.

Freesia boasted lush land and military prowess. We had fertile soil and abundant resources, and we shared a border with the ocean. We had other sources of water as well. All in all, we were the envy of many of our neighboring nations.

We were also the only place in the world where humans with special powers were born. Our royal family, myself and my daughter Pride included, had the power of precognition. We knew well that many countries with legalized slavery desired those miraculous powers, though we found the concept repugnant. They wanted us to become their “products.”

“Is that true?”

Our castle was nothing like castles in other lands. It sprawled out, as large as some cities in smaller countries. The meeting rooms had incredibly thick walls and no windows, making them ideal locations for discussing secret information.

In one such room, I sat at the head of a long table, addressing the man across from me. I squinted my golden eyes, a match in color for the hair spilling over my shoulders. I’d even put on makeup for this important guest from outside the country.

Albert, my prince consort, sat at my side. Clark, the vice commander of the Freesian royal order, stood at the back of the room with a group of knights. Vest, the seneschal, wore a far more imposing expression than usual. His blue eyes seemed to glow, and he never tore them away from that guest at our table.

“Yes, it’s very much true, Your Majesty.”

The man, who spoke with a casual tone, was being perfectly polite on the surface. Only his expression came across as insincere, arousing my suspicion. His fox-like eyes narrowed as he smiled. He kept his dark purple hair tucked behind his ears, except for a few deliberately stray strands on the right side.

Vest’s brow wrinkled as he studied the man. This representative of the Rajah Empire hadn’t arrived with only his servants. Behind him stood his chief of staff

and military general as well. The rest of his attendants lined up next to them were completely motionless, as if they were mere decorations.

Only a few minutes ago, a servant had whispered into Vest's ear, informing him that the war was won. Vest then relayed the news to me and Albert.

The Rajah representatives arrived later than expected, almost as if they'd predicted when the war would end. They'd agreed to hold the meeting here, and they seemed utterly calm in spite of being cut off from updates about the war.

The purple-haired man held up his glass and smiled. Since setting foot in my castle, he'd never once shown any fear of me. In fact, he smiled at me as if we were old friends, greeting me with a handshake. The man remained completely composed even after we showed him to the meeting room. He simply smiled at the Freesian royalty, even as my knights confiscated his entourage's every last weapon, from knives down to pens. He went as far as to praise our country, our castle, me as our queen, and the very room itself.

He took a sip from his glass after responding to my question. The expensive wine elicited a smile from him before he continued his explanation.

"The Rajah Empire has absolutely nothing to do with the war between Copelandii and the United Hanazuo Kingdom. I'm embarrassed to say that I only learned of the matter just now." He swirled his wine around in the glass as though amused.

The Rajah Empire was a massive country full of slavers. We also believed it to be the force behind the invasion of Hanazuo, given that it was one of the few openly aggressive countries in the world. Yet our discussion was proceeding with ease. This man, a representative of Rajah, answered all of my questions without hesitation.

"I see," I said. "However, I understand that Copelandii, Alata, and Rafflesiana—who all joined forces to invade Hanazuo—are colonies of Rajah."

"Yes, that's exactly right," the representative replied. "It brings me great shame to see that we've overplayed our hand in an attempt to bring in new products. At the current moment, we're allowing all of our territories—especially those farther away from us—to conduct themselves however they

see fit on all matters excluding trade. We couldn't possibly manage the affairs of every single colony under our command."

The man cocked his head to one side.

"I believe Copelandii made this decision on their own, using the name Rajah to persuade other nearby colonies to join them in their efforts. I hear that there's been bad blood in that region for years now." He spoke without shame, yet his expression gave me the sense he was lying. "I never expected things to go this far," he murmured, pressing the glass to his chin and glancing up at the chandelier above us.

I squeezed the documents in my hands, trying to hold my composure as the Rajah representative went on.

"What do you say to our little proposal? Rajah merely desires complete and total peace between us and Freesia. Your Majesty's wish is for us to bring about this peace by removing ourselves from the United Hanazuo Kingdom. But as I explained, the war was not our doing. In which case..."

He paused to gulp down the remaining wine in his glass, then smiled pleasantly at me.

"If Freesia will agree to sign a peace treaty with us right here and now, Rajah will take responsibility and handle the three invading countries ourselves. We'll make them withdraw and promise to never go after Hanazuo again."

Despite his polite smile, I sensed ill intentions behind his expression. I schooled my face into neutrality and stared back at him.

"I cannot say we expected that," I began. "Are you *authorized* to make such a decision alone, Prince Adam Borneo Nepenthes?"

"I am the crown prince, Your Majesty. I've already been acknowledged as the heir to Emperor Alf and granted all the relevant privileges. That is why I was left in charge of discussions with Freesia."

Prince Adam narrowed his eyes. The smile on his face was as cheerful as ever, but a darkness lurked beneath. He set his empty wine glass on the table, folded his hands together, and leaned forward.

“What I truly seek is an alliance, although we’ve already failed to control three of our smaller, distant colonies.”



He sneered at the mention of the three countries, eyes flashing like he'd caught me in some clever trap. "What do you say?"

I said nothing. As a country, Freesia always wanted allies—but we strongly opposed enslavement. We couldn't possibly cooperate with a slave-producing country like Rajah. Still, I could secure peace simply by having us both agree to nonaggression. Our only obligation would likely be invitations to Rajah's larger formal ceremonies, and nothing more. An alliance, however, was a relationship of mutual cooperation. Freesia could very well be forced to participate in any future invasions that Rajah undertook.

"If you agree to an alliance, your cooperation in the acquisition of our 'products' will surely stimulate your towns' economies," Prince Adam said. Vest choked at that, but the prince ignored him. "You can use criminals, if you prefer."

The Freesian people, as the only nationality in the world that gave birth to users of special powers, would make for incredibly valuable slaves. It was true that if Freesia formally became a slave-producing state, its markets would be flooded with people of every country where slavery was legal, delivering a huge boon to our economy.

"We wish for peace and would gladly sign a treaty to that end," I told him. "However, our position on an alliance remains unchanged. Apologies."

Prince Adam kept a straight face. "That's unfortunate," he said, though he sounded like he'd expected that response.

I signaled to Vest. "Please prepare the treaty." He came over and set fresh documents before me.

My seneschal and I understood the scope of the situation without exchanging more than a glance. The Rajah Empire, and therefore Prince Adam, were not to be trusted. We knew Rajah played a hand in Hanazuo's invasion, regardless of their public statements on the matter. Nevertheless, getting this treaty signed was a valuable step in securing peace.

Freesia and its allies wanted more than the liberation of Hanazuo—we sought a future without conflict between ourselves and Rajah. Signing a peace treaty

meant that another war was off the table, no matter how poorly our countries might get along. Additionally, Prime Minister Gilbert was working on a means to retrieve Freesian citizens who'd been sold off as slaves, which would be much easier for him to do if we had a peaceful relationship with Rajah. Their empire was the biggest contributor to the slave trade, after all.

As for Rajah, the treaty would also make things easier for them. In the future, they could invite us to join their trade. And they wouldn't have to fear making an enemy of us. It was an advantageous agreement for both sides.

"Please sign here."

With the stroke of our pens, Rajah's colonies—Copelandii, Alata, and Rafflesiana—had to make a full retreat from the United Hanazuo Kingdom—an ally of Freesia. At the same time, I feared this treaty would go on to have a deep impact on the histories of Freesia and Hanazuo both.

"Are you all right, Elder Sister?!"

It was Stale who rushed up to me first, appearing via teleportation. Judging by how winded he was, he must have been in a real panic. Sweat dampened his brow. As soon as he looked me in the eyes, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Stale! I'm so glad you're safe."

I was especially happy to note that he appeared uninjured. When I asked him what happened to the knights who were with him, he said they'd returned to the castle together, but Stale alone had teleported away to be with me.

When he informed me that all the knights with him had survived, I sank deeper into the sofa. I still didn't know exactly how many injuries we'd suffered overall, but this was excellent news all the same.

I glanced up at Stale, who seemed on the verge of saying something. Maybe he was worried about Tiara and Arthur, whose groups weren't back yet.

"Are you hurt?" I asked, but he said he was all right with something of a gloomy look on his face. "Stale, come here for a moment."

I empathized with his worries that Tiara and the others might have gotten

hurt. When he came to me, he bent down and leaned his head close so I could whisper in his ear. Instead, I leaned forward on the sofa and wrapped my arms around him.

The weight of my hug threw off his balance and sent him crashing into the sofa. Stale hadn't expected this surprise attack, so he had no way of stopping himself from falling toward me. The sofa dipped from the combined weight of our bodies atop each other. From behind me, Captain Callum and Captain Alan rushed forward to support me.

"Pri—I mean, Elder Sister, what are you doing?!" Stale cried, but I couldn't hold back anymore, so I just squeezed him tighter.

"I'm so glad you're all right!" I said, the words bursting free.

As soon as I felt him in my arms, even through his armor, the reality of Stale's safe return filled me with joy. I wouldn't have been able to bear the pain if Stale had gone to the south of Cercis in my place and suffered some sort of injury because of it.

I pressed my cheek to his armored chest and took another deep breath. Something rustled through my hair; Stale was combing the locks back with his fingers. I stiffened from the unexpected sensation, and his hand tensed.

A soft exhale left him. "Thank goodness."

I loosened my grip on him, momentarily confused. Stale rose slowly and stepped away from the sofa. Then he kneeled before me, his cheeks pink, as though I'd squeezed him too tightly. He just smiled, his dark eyes serene.

"It's a relief to see that you haven't changed," he said.

He then thanked the knights at my back for protecting me. They bowed in response. Stale's eyes turned back to me, and his expression softened into one I'd learned to cherish over all these years. He reached out and stroked my leg, avoiding the bandaged part of my calf and instead brushing my thigh over my armor, his fingers so soft I could barely feel them.

"Now you can finally rest," he said.

He asked if it hurt where he was touching. I shook my head and his shoulders

relaxed. That alone showed just how much Stale had been worrying about me. My heart skipped a beat. He set a hand on my back, and at first I thought he was about to rub it.

“I’m not going to hold back anymore,” he said, voice and expression darkening.

“Huh?”

Stale set one arm around my back and another under my legs, lifting me off the sofa.

“Wha...?! Stale!”

I was too startled to say anything more. My two imperial knights watched with wide eyes, but they couldn’t just snatch me out of the arms of a prince. None of us seemed to know what to do or say. Meanwhile, Stale was asking a nearby guard if there was a private room where I could rest.

“Wait, Stale!” I said. “Not everyone’s back yet! I have to greet them and thank them. I can’t just run off and—”

“I’ll do all that for you,” he cut in. “Wearing that armor must be tiring. Please change out of it and get to bed where you can rest properly.”

Stale had no mercy. I couldn’t wriggle out of his arms; all I could do was fuss as Stale followed a guard out of the room. Captain Callum and Captain Alan followed, but I was positively dumbfounded by Stale’s actions.

When I tried to protest, Stale halted and looked down at me in his arms. I thought maybe he was finally going to listen to me, but his eyes narrowed with anger.

“If you really insist, then maybe you need your younger brother to help you change? It *would* be faster to use teleportation.”

My blood turned to ice. Of course I didn’t want my brother teleporting my armor off me! Stale chuckled at my befuddlement, the sound of his mirth sending a flush of embarrassment through my whole body.

“I’ll bring Lotte and Mary as soon as we reach the room,” he said. “I’m sure you’ll feel better in the hands of your personal maids.”

Um, you don't have to bring them all the way from Freesia just to change me...
I had a feeling Stale might actually send me straight back to Freesia if I put up any more of a fight, so I decided to stay silent.

The guard took us to a guest room where Stale set me down on a chair. I could have died from embarrassment. I squeezed my fist and hung my head to hide the shame burning in my cheeks.

"I'll go retrieve Lotte and Mary now."

I pressed my lips together, incapable of mustering a reply. That was when I looked up, met Stale's gaze, and realized his face was as red as mine.

"I-I apologize. I got a bit...carried away," he stammered.

Stale pressed his fingers to the black frames of his glasses, covering his entire face. I was pretty sure that I must have been the only princess in history to have her younger brother carry her in his arms. Composed as he appeared on the outside, he must have been just as embarrassed to have to carry his sister around like that.

"What am I doing? Help her change?!" he muttered at himself. Maybe even Stale got surprised by his scheming strategist side sometimes. That threat of teleporting my armor away was really something.

"Stale."

The longer Stale acted flustered, the calmer I became.

"I'm sorry for making such a disrespectful suggestion, Pride!"

"Thank you."

Once again, Stale fell totally still and silent, lips slightly parted.

"It makes me really, really happy that you're so concerned about me," I said.
"You really don't mind taking over some responsibilities for me?"

Even though the war was over, I still had to greet and thank my knights, settle some remaining matters, raise morale by showing up in my armor, and bring it all to a proper conclusion. I could appear in front of others as long as I had a chair to sit in. I might even be able to stand on one foot at this point, albeit with some difficulty. But I knew how much Stale and the others were worrying about

me. I smiled sadly at my pathetic state.

“Of course I’ll help!” Stale replied.

I thanked him again and started to remove my uniform jacket to show him that I truly planned on resting up. Just then, Captain Callum pulled it off me as gracefully as a butler.

“After I bring the maids, I’m going to go into town to check on Tiara and the knights, since I’m worried about them too,” Stale said. “I’ll find Prince Leon and Val as well.”

I nodded. Stale could teleport directly to them and find out how they were doing. Val and Leon didn’t know that the bells signaled the end of the war, so someone had to go inform them quickly. Stale reminded me to signal for him if anything happened, and I thanked him yet again. He paused, mulling over something, then faced the direction of the main headquarters of the castle.

“I wonder how King Yohan is doing,” he said.

The king had been too absorbed in his prayer to notice Stale’s arrival at the time. King Yohan had stopped trembling by that point, but he remained stiff and still, almost as if he’d passed out. He probably didn’t even realize we’d left. He’d seemed so absorbed in his praying, something I hadn’t seen him do even once while we’d waited anxiously in that room for the war to end.

Stale was clearly deciding if he should return and bid farewell to the king, but I told him it wasn’t necessary and asked him to go ahead and check in with the others first. I would apologize to King Yohan if this caused any sort of problem. Instead, I asked the castle guards to inform King Yohan of my relocation when he was finished praying. I didn’t want him to be interrupted in his postwar prayer, not when he’d clearly been holding back the urge to reach out to God for so long.

Ring! Ring! Ring!

“The bell!”

Everyone swiveled toward the loud clang that signaled the end of the war.

Leather groaned as knights gripped their swords tighter. Even our enemies realized, to their horror, what must be happening as that chime echoed over the battlefield. They froze, not daring to resume their attack.

“The war is over.”

The first person to murmur those words was Tiara. Her arm was cocked back, with a knife poised to throw. It lit a fire in me, and I swallowed hard. Then I gripped the reins from behind her on the horse we shared and scanned the battlefield.

“Bro!” I yelled, my voice strained by a rising sob. It wasn’t just me—every friendly knight and soldier on the battlefield was waiting for King Lance’s response.

He stared in the direction of the bell as though in a trance, then uttered a simple “Yeah.”

His reply was only for me. He shot me a glance as he raised his sword toward the heavens in triumph.

“Our homeland,” he declared, “the United Hanazuo Kingdom, is victorious! Know this, everyone! This country belongs to us!”

His powerful voice boomed over the battlefield, breaking the stupefied silence. Cries and cheers erupted all over. The enemies, knowing they were defeated, dropped their weapons. The Hanazuo troops gathered around my brother, raised their swords, and cried out for their king. The knights and soldiers also surrounded me and Princess Tiara on our horse, voicing their elation. The entire battlefield transformed into a celebration.

Amid all the praise from the soldiers, I searched for my brother. I couldn’t have possibly been more proud of him, but also...

“Hey!”

Something struck my chest. Princess Tiara had turned around in the saddle to push at me to urge me to get off the horse. As I floundered for a response, she glared at me with those crystalline eyes of hers.

“Don’t you want to go be with your brother?” she asked. “I’m all right now, so

go ahead and get down. You belong with them right now, not here with me.”

She added that a knight could take the reins for her and snatched them out of my hands, passing them to one of the men nearby. I nodded and sprang off the horse.

“Bro!” I shouted the moment I hit the ground. I whooped loud enough to drown out the knights and soldiers all around, then unsheathed my sword to hold it up like Bro’s.

The troops cleared a path for me. I could see the respect shining in their eyes after what I’d done in this battle. My brother was still sitting atop his horse. He lowered his blade slowly to his side and met my gaze with intensity, as though urging me not to relax too soon.

“Cedric!” he said, his solemn voice meant for me and no one else. He swung down off his horse, sheathed his sword, and reached out for me. The smile on his face was the ultimate proof that we’d won this war.

“Big Sister! I’m so glad you’re all right!”

Tiara leapt at me after Lotte and Mary finished changing me out of my armor and into a dress. She launched into a rapid-fire explanation of how Stale had teleported all members of royalty—her, Cedric, and King Lance—away from where they’d battled in the town. He’d sent a few knights and soldiers with them, leaving the rest to apprehend and clean up the remaining enemies.

When Stale returned from delivering updates to Leon and Val, he sent Cedric and King Lance back to their homeland of Cercis. Not until after he’d teleported them to the main headquarters back in the castle, though. I assumed he was being overly careful in regards to King Yohan, given his shaken state, or perhaps considerate of Cedric and King Lance, who were concerned about King Yohan. Only after all that did he bring Tiara and her knights to my room.

I wouldn’t be able to speak to Cedric and King Lance just yet. Stale had insisted they focus on affairs in Cercis for now and prioritize their homeland before debriefing with a foreign princess.

“I’m so glad you’re home safe, Tiara,” I said. “You’re not hurt, are you? Wasn’t

it scary out there?!”

I was seized with a desire to protect my little sister. I grabbed her by the shoulders, but couldn't see any blood or injuries through her armor.

“I'm fine!” Tiara responded with a smile. “I'm just glad that nothing bad happened to you. Big Brother told me our knights won the battle!” She leapt up in the air with joy, clapping her hands together. “Arthur must have worked so hard!”

“He sure did.”

Any uninjured knights from the northern front would be taking care of the remaining enemy forces right about now. They would also rescue anyone in Hanazuo who needed aid. Whichever group he decided to assist, I probably wouldn't see Arthur for some time.

“I sure hope Arthur, Vice Captain Eric, and the rest of the knights are safe,” I mused. The two vice captains were both incredibly skilled, and I was certain they would be all right, but it was hard not to worry.

“They're all right!” Tiara said, balling her hands up into fists in her determination. “I'm sure they made it out safe! Please just focus on yourself right now, Big Sister! The war is over now, and we have Big Brother, Prime Minister Gilbert, King Lance, and King Yohan with us. We don't have to worry about fighting anymore, and those bombs... We're all...safe now, so...”

Tiara's words started to slow. Her cheerful tone deepened. By the end of her speech, her arms hung limply at her sides and her head drooped.

“Tiara?” I prompted, cocking my head at her sudden change.

She started to tremble. Then the little girl in front of me burst into tears. Knowing what must have set her off, I reached out to gather her in my arms before uttering another word. I embraced her slender back and pulled her close to me. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders. With her face so close to mine now, I could see the redness in her face and tears streaming down her cheeks. She hiccupped as she cried.

“I'm sorry, Tiara,” I said. “You must have been so frightened.”

She wasn't all right; far from it. It was her first time on a battlefield and her first time witnessing death up close. She had certainly been the target of many enemy attacks when she was out there.

Tiara leaned her weight against me. She shook her head over and over again like she couldn't speak, clinging to my body with all the strength in her arms. Her sobs racked her body. Just thinking about the fear and danger she must have experienced broke my heart. Her tears dampened my neck while I stroked her soft hair. Little by little, her pure voice cleared enough to force out coherent words.

"I'm...I'm so glad that you and Big Brother... both made it out alive. I really thought...you might die!"

My chest clenched around her words. All of a sudden, I went limp, falling backward on the bed with Tiara still in my arms. She let out a yelp of surprise as she collapsed on top of me.

"Huh?!" Tiara looked down at me, her cheeks still shining with tears. Her beautiful eyes went round with concern. I simply hugged her even tighter instead of responding.

"Princess Pride!"

"Are you all right?"

Mary and Lotte called out to me. Even Captain Alan and Captain Callum were watching me with concern.

"I'm so sorry," I said.

Those words overflowed from my heart as I stared up at the ceiling with the five of them at the periphery of my vision.

The second that Mary and Lotte arrived here by teleportation, their faces went white with fright at the sight of my leg. They'd gently brushed the dirt and grime off my skin and then carefully picked new clothes for me. They took great care to avoid the injury even after they finished changing me into a dress from the castle.

Captain Alan and Captain Callum wore more pained expressions than I did the

whole time. Even Tiara appeared more upset here than she had on the battlefield.

All of them had been so worried about me.

Their concern hit me like a fist to the chest. I thought I'd understood how much they cared for me, but Tiara's words just now had brought it all into startling focus. The more I treated myself as disposable, the more I hurt everyone around me.

Why was it so hard for me to realize something so simple?

I tightened my hold on Tiara. Goosebumps rippled over my skin. I buried my face in her shoulder to hide my tears and apologized again. I was probably breathing too heavily for anyone to make out my words. I tried to inhale and steady my voice.

"I'm sorry I scared you all!"

Finally, I managed to get the words out. Tiara stopped breathing for a beat, then burst into a whole new bout of tears. This time, instead of choking out her words, she just howled shrilly rather than trying to communicate anything.

Why was it that all I ever did was hurt people? These people, the ones who flew to my side when I was in pain—they'd all been so worried about me. From here on out, I hoped to be more aware of the immense kindness of the people who cared so deeply for someone like me.

The first thing I felt was a warmth in my hand. I must have fallen asleep at some point. My memories of the end of that conversation were hazy. My left hand was so warm. I squeezed around something soft. When I cracked my eyes open, I found someone looking up at me.

"Pride?" a gentle voice asked as I blinked.

Night had fallen, leaving the room dim and gray. Once my vision focused, I finally made out the face of the person at my side.

"Leon?"

His pale skin practically glowed in the darkness. I could just make out his

relieved smile thanks to the tiny flames still flickering in the room.

“How are you feeling? Does your leg still hurt at all?” he asked.

His words gradually lured me out of my slumber. *That’s right. I was in my room with Tiara after the war came to an end...*

My thoughts were still sluggish, but I pieced together that I must have fallen asleep in the middle of that conversation. I burned with embarrassment at making such a childish mistake.

“No, I’m just fine now,” I said. I remembered collapsing backward onto the bed, but at some point, someone had tucked me in properly.

“I was startled to hear about your injury,” Leon said. “I’m just glad your life isn’t in danger.”

I smiled at Leon’s kind words. “Thank you.”

I couldn’t make out much of his expression in the dark room. He remained completely still at my bedside. Just how long had he been there?

“You saved a soldier from Cercis, right?” he said. “I really admire that side of you. It’s not the sort of thing I could do.”

I was about to brush off the praise, but Leon set his finger just before my lips before I could. The ambient heat helped wake me up.

“All the same, you can’t go getting hurt like that. You’ll be the queen someday, so it’s not right for you to expose yourself to danger so casually. It hurts all the people who care about you. Including me, of course.”

For just a second, a bewitching light flashed in his eyes. I pressed my lips together, not daring to move a muscle as Leon withdrew his finger.

Leon wasn’t speaking out of turn. He was the heir to the throne of Anemone, so he understood my position better than most. It sent a chill through my body to hear him say aloud what I’d been thinking just before I fell asleep.

His smile morphed into something more entrancing. “I’m sorry to say this when you’ve just woken up,” Leon said, turning up the flame in one of the nearby lanterns so I could see him better. “But you’re a person who’s very loved, after all.”

He turned up another lantern. This one was closer to me, and I squinted against the sudden light.

Wearing that charming smile, he pointed at my left hand. I followed his gaze... and realized the warmth I'd felt upon waking was coming from Tiara's hand wrapped around mine. She was still sitting in the chair at my side, slumped over onto my bed in a deep sleep. Someone had draped a blanket over her armored back. She must have stayed with me all this time.

"She was awake when we arrived, but she never wanted to leave your side," Leon explained. He beamed at me with radiant kindness.

I wanted to burst into tears all over again at the sight of Tiara, so faithful, at my side. She was so exhausted, yet she wanted to stay with me no matter what.

"The same goes for them, of course," Leon continued, pointing in the opposite direction.

I looked to see Captain Callum and Captain Alan watching over me. They dipped their heads respectfully when we made eye contact. I knew they must have stood guard all night, refusing to take a moment's rest.

I had awakened to find so many people all here for me, so many people who refused to leave my side. A swell of happiness bubbled in my chest, threatening to boil over. Tears prickled at the corners of my eyes. Embarrassed, I bit down on my bottom lip to hold them back. A few stubborn ones slipped out, rolling down my cheeks. Before they could drip to the sheets, Leon grazed my cheek ever so slightly, connecting with the lingering tears to brush them away. I lifted my head in shock, but he simply swiped at the tears on my other cheek as well.

"I've never been able to touch your tears before," he said, his tone proud yet teasing, somehow both enchanting and endearingly human.

My heart skipped a beat. The glow of the lanterns made his lips shine. I tried to sit up, flustered by the sight of him.

"Are you all right?" Leon said, placing a hand on my back to help me up.

I kept Tiara's hand in mine and tried not to move my leg as I scooted backward. I leaned into Leon's hand for support and propped myself up against the pillow behind me.

I searched around for Lotte and Mary, but Leon said, “We suggested to Prince Stale that they return home for the night.” He smiled down at me. “I really do love that smile of yours. It’s warmer than the sun.”

Heat crept into my face and burned in my cheeks. Those words suited Tiara much better than me. What could I do but shrink down in shyness at such a compliment?

I wondered how long I’d been sleeping for. I turned my head to ask Captain Callum what time it was when I spotted something strange on the wall behind Leon. I hadn’t noticed it while lying down, but now I squinted at Leon’s shadow, trying to figure out if that dim figure was a person or not.

“Val? Khemet? Sefekh?” I said.

Leon’s smile twisted as he looked over his shoulder. Val remained silent and still, sitting on the floor with his back against the wall. I thought he must be asleep, but then his eyes glinted as he glared at me. His usual mailbag was leaning against the wall, while Khemet and Sefekh slept on either side of him. They were the reason he couldn’t get closer. I waved at him, but he simply clicked his tongue and turned his head away in return.

“He waited all this time for you to wake up,” Leon whispered.

I blinked at Val, who glared at Leon’s back.

“Hey! What did you just tell her?!” Val snapped. “You little—” Sefekh and Khemet murmured in their sleep, and Val cut himself off, trying not to disturb them.

“He told me they would be loud if they woke up,” Leon said with a chuckle. Val stared daggers at Leon’s back and scratched at his head in irritation.

“Thank you for worrying about me,” I said. “I’m really sorry for everything.”

The gratitude and apology, meant for both Leon and Val, rang out clearer than I expected—clear enough for them to hear. Leon smiled with true warmth. Behind him, Val’s eyes were as wide as saucers, though he kept his lips pressed together into a hard line.

“I’m so happy that all four of you are safe.”

Neither Val nor Leon were ever supposed to be involved in this war. They must have put in all kinds of work that I didn't even know about. I could never thank them enough. Sadly, these words were all I had to give them right now.

Leon stroked my hair again, so gently I could hardly even feel his hand against my head. As he did, he watched me with that alluring gaze of his. My breath stopped dead in my chest. He pulled his hand away slowly and leaned in closer.

"It's all right," he said. "Everything was perfectly stable as of an hour ago. You should head home to your beloved Freesia."

With that, he backed away and headed for the door. His sudden departure left me cold, but he turned to address me one final time.

"I'm going to have to head out first," he said. "My knights are waiting for me on the ship, and my country needs me. I'll tell Prince Stale that you're awake."

He gave me one last smile, bid farewell to Val and my knights, and disappeared out the door, shutting it without the slightest sound. Silence washed into the room in his wake.

Only once his footsteps had disappeared down the hall did I seem to find my breath again.

"Captain Callum...may I have a report on the current state of the war?" I asked.

He responded right away, launching into an explanation of the situation at hand on all fronts, including the peace treaty between Freesia and Rajah.

It wasn't long before Stale, having learned I was awake, appeared in my room with Arthur.

"Your Highness!" Arthur cried.

The last time I saw him was when he left for the northern front. Ever since that moment, I had no way of knowing if he was safe or not. My shoulders slid down away from my ears at the sight of him safe and whole now. I'd heard that none of our knights died, but I didn't yet know how many were injured.

Once he'd gotten his bearings, Arthur tensed. Sweat dripped down his face. Stale must have told him about my leg. I wished I could smile and reassure him,

but the heartbroken expression on his face silenced me. I couldn't help thinking of Tiara's words once again.

"I'm sorry to greet you in such a state," I said.

It was a strange apology, but I just couldn't find the right words. And though I tried to force a smile, the gesture didn't quite work either. Arthur just shook his head and approached, disregarding the knights standing guard in my room and Tiara sleeping at my bedside.

"Um, Stale told me all about your leg," Arthur said, struggling with each word. His face tightened with pain and worry as he glanced at the blanket over my leg.

"Yes, I was a bit reckless. But Captain Alan and Captain Callum saved me. It doesn't hurt anymore. I should heal up after a few more days."

I spoke slowly, hoping to calm Arthur with my words, but he snapped his head up with a gasp and looked over at the two captains. From where I sat, I couldn't see their faces. Arthur lowered his head in a deep bow to the both of them.

"I'm sorry!" he said. "I wasn't there with her..."

"What are you saying?" I asked. "You were out there protecting the people I care about."

Commander Roderick and all of his knights were alive. Nothing had filled me with more joy than that report from Captain Callum. I didn't need to hear Arthur's name to know how hard he must have fought out there.

Arthur hung his head. I reached for him, leaning forward enough to stroke his hair and beckon him closer. Eventually, he lifted his head.

"Commander Roderick...and all the knights...are among the people I care about. Thank you for protecting them," I said.

He finally leaned closer, though he gritted his teeth and squeezed his hands into fists. "Still, I wanted to protect you too!" His shoulders trembled as he held back tears. His voice came out rough as he fought to keep it steady.

Tiara let out a quiet groan in response to Arthur's shout, eyes creaking open. Her hand tugged loose out of mine. She sat up abruptly at the sight of Arthur and Stale, rising from her chair as though to offer it to the men.

“I’m sorry!” Arthur kept saying.

He refused to raise his head, bowing under the weight of the responsibility he heaped on himself. As my imperial knight, he must’ve been burdened by the news of my injury. He was such a kind soul. Yet only a few hours ago, I probably wouldn’t have viewed this situation with the same perspective.

“I’m sorry.”

This time, I was the one apologizing. I reached out for him again, and he startled away from my touch. His eyes finally met mine, confusion lighting his gaze an instant before he pulled me into a hug.

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” I told him. “Thank you for enduring that pain for my sake.”

Arthur’s hands trembled around me, but they gradually made their way up to my shoulders. I thought he wanted me to release him, but then he squeezed my shoulders just gently enough to pull me closer.

I understood it now: Arthur cared about me. That was why this hurt him so much.

“I’m so glad you all made it back safely,” I said. “You must have fought so hard out there. The wish you made six years ago...finally came true.”

I could feel Arthur swallowing hard as he murmured his assent to each of my remarks.

“Even if I had a vision that this was going to happen to me...I would still have wanted you to go to the front lines. I would always believe that you were going to do wonderful things.”

I was so happy that the same Arthur who had cried over his desire to save the commander six years ago was now capable of fighting alongside that same commander. I still didn’t know Arthur’s exact accomplishments on the battlefield. But the lack of casualties alone spoke volumes about his impact. After all...

“Physical wounds heal,” I went on. “The war is over because of how hard you knights fought. I’m unbelievably happy right now. Thank you so much.”

I loosened my grip on Arthur and placed my hands on top of his. His fingers twitched under my touch, but I squeezed them all the same. Slowly, Arthur lifted his head to look at me. He bit down on his bottom lip, holding back tears, yet the strength in his gaze made me smile.

“From here on out, I’ll keep relying on you again and again,” I said.

His mouth fell open at that. A red flush washed through his cheeks, warming their pallor. I was about to release his hands, but he squeezed me back.

“Next time!” he said. “I’ll be sure to make it to you in time!”

His declaration was quiet, yet it rang through the room. I went stiff and speechless as he clutched my hands and voiced his resolve just as he had six years ago.

Things were different now, though. Even though he was red-faced, he didn’t cry today like he had back then. He’d grown from a boy to a man, one only two years older than me. His powerful determination shone through his tears.

Finally, the intensity in his eyes abated and he released my hands, stroking my fingers gently instead, almost like he was counting them.

“Please rest well,” he said. “If you’re happy and healthy...that makes us happy too.”

The sheer compassion in his voice almost made me lose my composure. He cast his gaze down to my hands, smiled softly, and squeezed again. The warmth of his touch spread through me, leaving pure relief in its wake.

Now that Arthur was closer to me, I noticed the mud on his cheek. He caught me staring and quickly wiped it away. Though he wasn’t injured, I could still tell how hard and desperately he’d fought by the messy state he’d arrived in.

“Look at you,” I said. “Thank you for working so hard.”

The words came out on their own. Arthur’s cheeks flushed an even darker scarlet; maybe he was embarrassed because he’d rushed here still dirty. He hid the hand he’d used to wipe away the dirt, but clutched my hand in his clean one. His smile and that look in his eyes brimmed with light.

“I’ll put my life on the line as many times as you need, Your Highness,” he

said. "I'll be back, I promise."

The calm composure on his face reminded me so much of his father, the commander. Arthur truly was an adult now.

As soon as that thought entered my mind, I remembered something important. I turned to Stale and Tiara on the opposite side of the bed. I reached for them. Confused, the two closed the distance between us. It was Arthur who figured out what was happening first, gulping and pulling his hand away from mine in a rush.

I leisurely took Stale's left hand and Tiara's right as they positioned themselves on either side of Arthur. When I yanked on both of their hands at once, they toppled down to me, dragging Arthur with them. Arthur supported Tiara with one arm so that she wouldn't be putting her weight on me, while Stale clung to Arthur by wrapping his arm around his back to stop himself from falling. But I didn't care about any of that. Pure happiness surged through me as we collapsed into a heap together.

"You all made it!" I said.

I'd sent the three of them off to war, and now we were reunited. All three of them had come home safe. Nothing could possibly bring me more joy.

I relaxed my grip, but Tiara seized the opportunity to wrap her arms around my shoulders. "We made it!" she cried, then turned around to look at Stale and Arthur.

I joined her in staring them down. Slow smiles spread across their faces.

"We made it," they said simultaneously, a bit more serious than Tiara but no less joyful.

"But you're a person who's very loved, after all."

Leon's words rang in my mind.

It was hard to think of someone like me being "very loved," but right then, the warmth in my chest was enough to drown out my doubts. If Leon was right, and these people truly cared about me so deeply, then I had to be the most fortunate person in the world.

Chapter 3:

The Blasphemous Princess and the End of the War

“YOU WANT TO...*extend your stay, Pride?*”

The next morning, a communication specialist connected me to the Freesian castle so I could speak with Mother. I nodded in response to her question.

A nervous flutter batted at my stomach at the prospect of conversing with her for the first time since the war had ended. Tiara and I had left Stale to report to her alone last night, meaning I had to begin the conversation with an apology for contacting her so late.

“That’s right, Mother,” I said. “I apologize for the delay, and I take full responsibility for it. The truth is that I’ve suffered a *minor* injury, which my imperial knights prevented from turning into anything more serious, but both kings told me they didn’t feel comfortable sending the crown princess home with an injury.”

Mother’s eyes widened at the mention of me getting hurt. Father and Uncle Vest were probably with her, as well as her guards and knights, so she held her composure and asked calmly, “*What kind of injury?*”

I assured her it wasn’t too serious. “All I did was twist my leg. It will heal soon, since it was treated by medics with special powers, but they requested that I stay here until I make a full recovery. As the queen’s proxy, I would also like to personally stand before the people of Hanazuo to bid them farewell. With your permission, of course.”

“*Very well,*” Mother said after a beat. “*Pride, you may stay until you’re fully healed. Please say hello to both kings for me as well.*”

I had a sudden flashback to my previous life—of my mother talking to me over the phone while I asked her permission to sleep over at a friend’s house. This wasn’t anything like that, but I still felt a bit awkward over the whole thing. I was relieved to have gained Mother’s permission to stay longer, though she didn’t waste a moment in continuing on with more rules.

“Be sure to come back within one week, and don’t travel by land. Have Stale teleport you and Tiara straight back to the castle.”

One week. That was longer than I’d expected. I’d worried I’d only get two or three days, so I breathed a sigh of relief, though I did wonder why I was supposed to be back “within” one week. Also, why were Tiara and I the only two who had to teleport back directly? Once I was fully recovered, there was no reason we couldn’t return home with the vanguard. But the look in Mother’s eyes brooked no argument. It was frankly surprising to see her worry quite this much over something like this.

With Mother’s approval, I asked Captain Callum to lift me up and ordered the broadcast to switch to King Lance and King Yohan. They quickly greeted Mother and launched into a discussion about me and my plans for future trade activity between our nations. My shoulders relaxed when it seemed like my injury truly wasn’t about to take center stage in the conversation.

Captain Callum returned me to my bed while I let out a sigh of relief. The two kings had accepted our prolonged stay in their country. They even agreed with my pleas to only tell Mother the details I approved of. All I could do now was hope that my leg would heal fully, thanks to treatment via special powers, before I returned to Freesia.

I turned around instinctively, searching for my imperial knights...and winced at the pain that seized my chest. Once the kings were done speaking to Mother, they came to bid me farewell, then left to attend to their official business. They closed the door quietly behind them. Tiara, my imperial knights, and I were now the only ones in the room.

“About time they beat it,” a quiet yet distinctly deep and annoyed voice said from the direction of the window.

I swiveled in time to find Val climbing into my room. Khemet and Sefekh waved and raced to my side.

“I see you’ve got two kings on a leash now too. Good goin’, Mistress,” Val said.

That was totally the wrong impression of this situation. “No, I simply asked them for a favor,” I explained, but Val just leaned up against the wall and

scratched his head.

“We’re gonna head on home too,” he said. “There’s nothin’ else for us to do in this country.”

Val swayed like he was sleepy. I suggested he rest up a bit before leaving.

“I don’t want that prince or the prime minister tryin’ to get me to do anything else for them,” he replied.

It was true that having Val around would make repairing the destroyed castle and townsfolk’s homes much easier. I couldn’t help wanting to ask for his help with that too.

I smiled awkwardly but held back the request as Khemet and Sefekh rushed to my side with shouts of “Get well soon!” I thanked them, then returned my attention to Val.

“I truly appreciate the ways in which you’ve helped me,” I said. “I’ll be sure to thank you properly some other time. You too, Khemet and Sefekh.”

I expressed my heartfelt gratitude to all three of them. Without them, this country would surely have suffered much more damage.

“Don’t waste your time on that,” Val grumbled. “Just let that leg of yours heal up already.”

He shot me a glare, perhaps still mad about all the work he had outside of his normal delivery duties. He turned his back to me, then clicked his tongue and turned around again, evidently gripped by indecision. Muttering to himself, he joined Khemet and Sefekh at my side. Val wavered where he stood, as if his body was so heavy with fatigue he couldn’t hold firm.

“Yes?” I prompted.

I couldn’t tell if he was feeling upset or something else. He remained silent for a few seconds, then leaned forward like he was about to topple over. Instead, he put his face close to my ear. I leaned toward him, prepared to hear some sort of complaint.

“I’ll be waiting for you in Freesia,” he whispered.

His hot breath warmed my ear. His deep, smooth tone rumbled through me,

making me shiver. I swallowed hard. When he backed away, I gaped up at him, but he wore the same annoyed pout as ever.

“Let’s go,” he said to Khemet and Sefekh at his side, then walked back to the window instead of the door. I watched them leave, blinking at Val’s back.

“See you in Freesia,” I managed.

All I received in return was a casual wave. He didn’t even glance back at me. Khemet and Sefekh waved goodbye to Tiara and me, then held on to Val’s sides. All three of them sailed out of the window and back toward the ground.

“If you miss Freesia so much, just go home already.”

Val had uttered those words to me yesterday on the battlefield.

A breeze slipped through the open window and rustled my hair. I tucked the loose strands behind my ear, where my skin was still warm from Val’s breath.

Yes. I’ll be home soon.

It was too little, too late, but I offered Val this response in my mind. I needed to recover quickly and head back to Freesia—the home of so many people I cared about.

Captain Callum shut the window. I turned my attention to Captain Alan, who stood behind me.

“What is it, Big Sister?” Tiara asked with a tilt of her head.

“Captain Alan, Captain Callum.”

My voice came out quieter than I intended, like I was speaking to someone right at my side, but they responded all the same. I met their eyes in turn—Captain Callum’s reddish-brown as rust and Captain Alan’s as orange as sunrise—and voiced the question lingering on my tongue.

“You two won’t do something silly now like retire as knights, will you?”

The captains stiffened. Tiara’s eyes widened as she slapped her hands over her mouth, gaze flickering between the three of us. Silence filled the room while the knights floundered for a response. I waited patiently, enjoying the breeze from the window Captain Callum hadn’t managed to shut before I

startled him. The rustle of the wind couldn't mask their audible gulps.

"Well... No matter what we choose, I don't think Callum or I will be able to escape punishment," Captain Alan said, trying to sound casual. I knew he didn't want me to worry, but he wasn't denying my allegations either. He scratched his cheek and smiled awkwardly.

"The two of us failed in an inexcusable way during this defensive war," Captain Callum said. "It's very possible that we'll be removed as imperial knights and stripped of our titles as captains."

He spared himself no sympathy, his words harsh and direct. He finally managed to close the window, perhaps using the task to distract himself. The slam of that window ushered in a tense silence.

"I was responsible for what happened to me," I said. "I was the one who separated from you. All you did was follow my orders."

"Still, it was our duty to keep you safe above all else," Captain Callum said.

His response was a little sterner than how he usually spoke to me. He slowly took up a position at Captain Alan's side. They approached me together, standing on either side of Tiara, who was at my bedside. Their serious expressions did not waver as they regarded me.

Neither of them was mistaken in their logic. The person under their care was injured—and she was the crown princess, at that. It was a major failure. But I had already hidden the extent of my injury from Mother and received permission to stay in this country until my leg healed fully.

"All right, then I forgive you personally," I said. "I'll be asking Commander Roderick and Mother to allow you to stay assigned to me. Also, I—"

"We failed to protect you!" Captain Alan shouted. His angry roar echoed through the room. I went stiff at the spike in volume.

"Alan!" Captain Callum snapped.

Captain Alan immediately apologized, then continued more quietly, "So as imperial knights, as captains, and as knights, we intend on accepting full responsibility. That was our decision from the very start."

Captain Alan smiled at me as if it was no big deal at all. My chest tightened at the forced cheer on his face.

“This is nothing for you to concern yourself with, Your Highness,” Captain Callum said. “The problem lies with us knights.”

Captain Callum smiled as well, but his gloom broke through the expression. My heart ached as I beheld the loyal men before me.

“It’s been an honor to serve you as an imperial knight, even for this brief time. I thank you for everything,” Captain Alan said.

“Arthur and Eric are excellent knights,” Captain Callum followed up. “I know they’ll continue to serve you well. Thank you for giving us this opportunity.”

The knights bowed their heads. They’d made their decision already, and I wouldn’t be able to change it, no matter what Commander Roderick and Mother said.

Tiara clutched at her chest, tears shining in her eyes. “It can’t be...” she whispered just loud enough for me to hear. Over the past year, she’d grown just as fond of these knights as I had.

“We apologize sincerely for failing to protect you,” they told me.

I tried to assure them that that wasn’t the case, but neither budged, so I wondered if they’d heard me at all. Finally, they straightened and smiled down at me.

“I’m sure Eric will have trouble performing the duties of imperial knight for a while, so we’ll continue to guard you until then,” Captain Callum told me.

“We promise that our successors will be the most qualified individuals,” Captain Alan said.

They continued so casually, like they were talking about a brief vacation and not the end of their time as knights. I looked at the two of them, and before I knew it, I was grabbing both captains’ right arms. Their eyes went wide. I held on tighter, afraid I wouldn’t be able to hold on through the tremble in my own arms. They could easily shake me off, but neither did.

“Princess Pride...?” Captain Alan said.

I couldn't find the right words. I simply pressed my lips together to hold back the cry that wanted to crawl out of my throat. I knew I had no right to say this, but it was something I needed to express.

"You protected me so well all this time," I said.

The knights held their silence. I must have looked so pathetic to them in that moment, but I had to get these words out before it was too late.

"You saved me. I'm alive right now because of you two."

They'd come to my rescue. I was the one who'd acted without thinking and left them with a mess to clean up. Things might have gone much differently if they weren't there to help. I could easily have died in this war, or I could have witnessed the crushing sight of that guard being killed. The two of us could have lost our lives together.

And yet...

"You both saved my life. I'm so grateful for you. So why?"

I got that far before I couldn't speak clearly anymore. The urge to cry welled up in my throat, and I struggled with whether I should even continue. They stared wide-eyed at me, completely still, while the lump in my throat only grew.

I didn't care about punishing them. I didn't care about their responsibilities or titles or the fact that I was a princess. I understood that Captain Callum and Captain Alan weren't trying to take responsibility for my injury simply because they felt guilty. This wasn't something I could solve with an emotional response. At the same time, I trembled with the urge to do *something*, trapped in a position where my only option was pouting like a child.

"I still want you two to protect me!" I cried, voice cracking.

The tip of my nose burned. My vision blurred, and I struggled to make out their faces. I knew they were facing me, but I didn't know if they were upset, shocked, or put off by the sight of me.

"I'm not a perfect princess yet..." I said. "You two have been so worried about me, but I didn't even notice... I'm such a fool!"

Had it not been for Tiara's words, I wouldn't have understood. I might have

gone on assuming the captains were just feeling guilty, but now I knew how much they genuinely worried about us and how much pain they'd suffered as a result of seeing me in danger.

"I'm begging you... Please continue to protect me, from here on..." I said, struggling to finish the statement. I hung my head, unable to look at them. Although I squeezed their hands tighter, I couldn't stop trembling.

I knew this was wrong of me. If these two men were ready to end their careers as knights, it wasn't my place to stop them. But my heart clenched when I realized their minds were made up. Like a child, all I could do was beg and pout.

There she was—the same selfish little princess from nine years ago.

The tears carved paths down my cheeks. Shudders rippled through my body. The heartbreak and anguish didn't make any sense. This wasn't something worth crying so hard over. I just couldn't stop myself from curling up around the pain. I tried to remind myself that breaking down like this would only upset them and make them uncomfortable.

I let go of both of the captains' hands and swiped my hand across my eyes, trying to hide my tears. "I'm sorry," I said. Tiara rubbed my back. I sucked in a shaky breath, fighting back a fresh wave of tears. "I know...that I have no right to stop you..."

My voice was hoarse. I lifted my head, my eyes swollen, and met the captains' serious stares. I was afraid my teeth would chatter if I unclenched my jaw.

"But I'd like you to think this over a little more. Please know that there are two people here who desire you as knights."

I wrapped my arms around Tiara's shoulders, and she nestled close to me.

"I want Arthur, Vice Captain Eric, and the two of you as my imperial knights," I said while Tiara nodded in agreement. "No one else. I have the highest expectations for you as knights—as captains—because of your excellent skills and your kind hearts."

I gave Tiara a squeeze before releasing her. The two knights were still frozen in place, as though they'd forgotten even how to breathe as they listened to

me. I reached out for them again.

“Please don’t forget this,” I said.

First, I removed Captain Alan’s glove. I struggled with the clasp until he undid it for me and slipped off his glove.

“Whatever decision you two might make in the future...”

I reached out to Captain Callum next. Understanding my intention, he undid his own glove first and slid it off easily with the other hand.

“...this alone is a truth that surpasses everything else.”

They offered me their bare hands. Captain Alan’s stout hand and Captain Callum’s toned hand had a knightly bearing, conveying reliability and steadiness even down to their very fingers. I gently took Captain Alan’s hand in both of mine and kissed the tips of his fingers.

Captain Alan floundered. “P-pardon, Your Highness?!”

His fingers shook under my lips, tickling them with the movement. I slowly removed my mouth and hands. A tremble ran up his arm.

Next, I moved to Captain Callum. He jerked backward, hesitant, but allowed me to take his hand when I reached out for it. I gave him the same kiss on the fingers. When I removed my lips from his trembling hand and released my grip, he slowly pulled it back to his side.

I looked up at the two of them without a word. Both men were blushing and staring at me, wide-eyed and frozen, as if they couldn’t believe what had just transpired.

I understood their shock. Both of them knew the meaning of those kisses: they were a symbol of admiration.

“The two of you saved my life. I celebrate your bravery and merits from the bottom of my heart. That was meant as proof.”

They gazed at their own fingers, still red in the face. Their mouths hung open, but neither of them spoke. The bewilderment of the two knights was completely natural. Not even members of the royal family exchanged kisses very often. Regardless, I wanted to show these two men just how serious I was

about caring for them. They didn't need to be ashamed of their accomplishments. No one could imitate them, let alone surpass them.

A few more words bubbled up in my throat, but just as I was about to speak...

Knock-knock.

A quick and heavy knock on the door echoed through the room. I was startled but managed to answer, listening for the response from the hall.

"It's Commander Roderick Beresford. I've brought knights who can treat your injuries with special powers. Is now a good time, Princess Pride?"

The sound of Commander Roderick's voice snapped the captains out of their stupor. They snapped their gloves back on in a panic and placed their arms behind their backs again. With absolute perfect posture, they turned toward the door. Only then did I call for the commander to enter.

"I apologize for the delay, Your Highness," Commander Roderick said as he strode into the room.

A group of knights followed him in, bowing to me as they entered. There were far more men than just the ones who could heal me with their special powers, however. Arthur was among them, and he joined the others in bowing once I made eye contact with him. The sheer number of knights here to see me startled me.

"These men knew of your condition in advance," Commander Roderick said.

When I looked closer, I realized all of these knights had been in the vicinity when I received medical treatment on the battlefield. They all wore looks of relief except Arthur. They must have been worried about my well-being all this time.

"Callum, Alan, hurry up and get some rest already," the commander said.

My imperial knights stood up straighter, though they also shuddered. Ever since yesterday's battle, Captain Callum and Captain Alan had been guarding me ceaselessly, forgoing sleep. The other knights must have come here to take over for them. It wasn't just Arthur, who was one of my imperial knights; Commander Roderick brought along a small army of knights to leave with me.

For some reason, Vice Captain Eric wasn't among them. Perhaps he had to watch over the First Squadron in place of Captain Alan.

"As your commander, I'm ordering you to rest until tomorrow's duties. Prince Stale gave his permission too."

Tiara and I dipped our heads to the two captains. They pressed their lips together and turned to leave as ordered, but I called out for them to wait.

"Just one more thing!"

I knew I didn't have to do this now. They would be my imperial knights again tomorrow...or at least, they'd agreed to stay with me until we returned home to Freesia. But I didn't want to drag up the conversation again tomorrow. I wanted to tell them everything today and leave the rest up to them.

Commander Roderick asked if he should leave, but I told him this would only take a moment. I called Captain Callum forward first. He approached with perfect posture in front of his commander and fellow knights.

As soon as our eyes met, his cheeks reddened with a nervous blush. I tugged him down closer to me, then whispered directly into his ear, finally uttering the words I'd been desperate to tell him this whole time.

Captain Callum lifted his head just slightly from inside my arms. I released him and smiled at his frozen expression. He offered a deep bow before exiting the room.

After watching him go, I looked to Captain Alan. He approached stiffly. Before I could even reach my hand out, he leaned over me and turned his ear in my direction. I leaned close and whispered to him as I had to Captain Callum.

As I spoke, *those* memories came rushing back to me. My chest tightened painfully. Without thinking, I pulled Captain Alan into a hug. His short, golden-brown hair tickled my face.

Captain Alan didn't say anything this time. I squeezed him tighter. Even just saying those words myself made my heart ache, let alone saying them to the captains as well. I fought off the threat of tears and finished the last of what I wanted to say. That was when I heard him take a shaky inhale.

Once I released him, Captain Alan staggered backward away from me. His face was tense, though he forced himself through a stiff bow. Then he raced out of the room, shutting the door behind him with a loud thud.

“I’m sorry for the wait, Commander Roderick,” I said after a brief silence.

The commander furrowed his brow as he stared at the door Captain Alan had just fled through. Slowly, he shifted his gaze back to me.

“All right. First off...”

“You’re here too, Alan?”

I’d come to the back of the Chinensian castle church. It was closed off temporarily, so it wasn’t as well defended as the rest of the castle. Most of the other knights had already left the castle as well, making this a perfect spot for Callum and me to hide away for the moment.

Callum sat by himself on a white bench behind the church with his elbows resting on his knees. He hung his head, covering his brow and eyes with his hands, and looked up only enough to meet my gaze.

“Well, it’s the only place I could think of that was close to the First Squadron,” I said, scratching my head.

I approached the bench without looking directly at Callum, crunching over the grass of the perfectly manicured lawn. Then I leaned against a nearby pillar and sank to the ground.

“I really can’t take it,” I said with a dry, humorless chuckle. The words emerged more as a sigh than a statement.

Callum didn’t look like his usual self either, and he had no reply. Not that I wanted one. I let the silence fall, hanging my head....

And the dam burst at last.

Tears spilled down my cheeks and struck my shoes. I tried to stymie them with my hands, but they slipped through the gaps between my fingers. When I clenched my teeth, they slid into my mouth, salty and bitter.

Callum remained slumped over, but his body was shaking. Tears flowed past his laced fingers. He made some sort of choked, strained sound that emanated from deep in his throat.

The idea of an imperial knight crying while on duty was unthinkable. As captains, we could never cry in front of our subordinates. We had to keep our emotions in check no matter what as we carried out our tasks. It didn't matter how our hearts stirred, chests ached, or throats clogged with lumps.

But now the war was over, Princess Pride was resting, and the emotions we'd held back all this time could come out at last.

I couldn't forgive myself as a knight for allowing Princess Pride to get so gravely injured.

There were thousands of individual things I regretted. I could have made the other knights take charge of Prince Cedric faster and sprinted back to the princess. That way, Alan could carry her while I carried the guard, and we all would have made it out safely. That would have been possible with Alan's legs and my special power.

In the midst of the war, I'd buried all those regrets, but now they came flooding out.

Why, why, why?! The image of the injured princess, who'd shed tears for us so many times, stabbed me straight in the heart. Not only did she refuse to blame us for our failings, but she went as far as to cover for us. Countless people—Arthur, Prince Stale, Princess Tiara, King Yohan, King Lance—cared about her and owed her debts of gratitude, but we knights were the ones who'd hurt her. It was unforgivable. I couldn't possibly call myself a knight anymore.

"I still want you two to protect me!"

It was the highest compliment a knight could possibly receive.

"Please know that there are two people here who desire you as knights."

"I believe you two will do even more great things as knights...and as captains."

She told both me and Alan that she approved of us, that she believed in us. All I wanted was to protect her. But I also wished I *had* protected her. Joy and regret swirled around in my stomach, leaving me queasy.

I thought back to the words Princess Pride had shared with us just before we left the room. She really was prepared to leave this situation up to me and Alan.

“Thank you for putting your lives on the line to save me. I’m so glad you both survived!”

Risking your life for the person under your protection was the most fundamental duty of a knight. We prided ourselves on undertaking that task. But as soon as I heard her say that, all I could think of was how I would protect her better next time. Part of me didn’t even believe there would be a next time, and still I yearned for a chance to do better.

I want to protect her properly next time. I won’t let her suffer a single scratch next time. I won’t make her cry for my sake next time. I’ll live up to her expectations next time. I’ll make sure she can smile next time. Over and over, I found myself desperately seeking that elusive “next time.”

“It’s too late for regrets...”

My voice croaked out of my throat as the tears spilled over. They wet my fingers and rolled down my arms, the weight of them unbearably heavy. The dam I’d been building up inside me burst, and I couldn’t hold any of it back anymore.

I knew what was coming. Alan had probably reached the same conclusion already. He would accept responsibility for our shortcomings. I couldn’t continue on alone, nor was there any chance I would go unpunished after having failed in the same exact way as Alan. Regardless of what Commander Roderick chose to do with us, the final decision would come down to us. How could I think of having a long career as a knight while Alan covered for me on his own? The shame would be unbearable. The two of us would have to—

“I’m so sorry, Callum!”

I raised my head at Alan’s choked sob. Tears streamed down his face, yet he still scowled at me through gritted teeth. I’d never seen him cry so hard.

My head was a mess. I couldn't parse his apology. Alan's shoulders lurched with his sobs, but I just sat there waiting for him to continue.

"But I still wanna protect her!"

His crying nearly drowned out his voice. I gulped when I realized Alan and I felt the exact same way.

"That's why..." he began, keeping his eyes on the ground and refusing to look up at me. "I want you to take the blame too!"

Even through his sobbing, his determination rang out clear in his voice.

I knew exactly what I'd done. Not taking responsibility for my failings as a knight would shame me forever. Callum and I both deserved punishment. We'd failed to protect the one person who needed our care more than anyone.

Not only that, but I didn't spot her injury until Callum pointed it out. I was totally powerless. Arthur put his trust in us, Prince Stale recognized our strength, Commander Roderick left us to take on this important duty, and Princess Pride believed we would keep her safe. That was the road we had traveled to become imperial knights.

But I'd wasted all of it.

I couldn't protect her. Those words clawed at me from the inside.

"You protected me so well all this time."



Princess Pride had spoken those words to us while crying for our sakes.

“You saved me. I’m alive right now because of you two.”

Callum saved her. He was ready to die so that Princess Pride and I could get away. He was a brilliant man, and that’s why he’d made the right decision even in the heat of the moment.

“The two of you saved my life.”

We saved it because that was *all* we were capable of saving. We wanted to keep the princess safe so badly.

I could have collapsed under the weight of my regrets. My stomach boiled like it was full of lava.

I knew I had to take responsibility for her. Even if Prince Stale forgave us, even if Princess Pride pulled the strings to quiet this all up, and even if my only punishment was demotion, I was still prepared to take all the blame for this myself.

But right now I couldn’t stop thinking about the last words Princess Pride said to me. That was the moment when I’d struggled the most to bite back my tears. All I could do was hold my breath and cram the emotions back down.

“I’m sorry I forced such a terrible decision on you.”

At first, I didn’t know what she meant. I thought she was talking about forcing us to take responsibility for ourselves. But then she’d pulled me closer.

“I’m sure that leaving Captain Callum behind was more painful than anything!”

I thought my heart was going to explode.

A sharp pain shot through my body at the mere memory of that moment. It was the pain of having to make the choice to leave Callum under that rubble. It was the pain of having to accept that as the best possible outcome in the moment.

But it also reminded me how powerless I was in that situation.

I hated, hated, hated, hated, hated, hated, *hated* myself for not being able to

do more. It was practically killing me. Having Callum cover for me and take the blame was that same nightmare coming back to life again. Just remembering that moment left my chest too tight for me to breathe. But as soon as I heard what Princess Pride wanted to tell me, it was like she was the one treating my wounds.

It was the opening of a fresh wound, but also the grazing of an old scar. Contradictory as it sounded, I knew that her words had saved me. The warmth of her words soothed the ache in my chest.

I wanted to protect her. This time, I would do it for sure, even if it meant giving up my life—I would protect both Princess Pride *and* Callum. I'd ensure they made it out of here safely. There were still so many things I had left to do... and not just as a knight.

Princess Pride had awakened a new desire in me, the desire to be the protector this time.

That desire burned away concern over things like shame, pity, or what the world might blame me for. I had to repay my debt. Next time, for sure, I would make sure the princess was safe.

"I still wanna protect her!"

Next time. This desire overwhelmed me. But I knew it wasn't something I could do on my own. Even when the regret was so heavy I wanted to collapse beneath it, it still hadn't snuffed out this desire to protect her. That was why...

"I want you to take the blame too!"

I need you to take me with you. I still want to be a knight with you.

I didn't care what form it took or how undignified it might be. I wanted to keep being a knight and protecting the princess.

"Of course I will!" Callum said.

His voice rang out strong and sure, despite the emotion choking him. I couldn't see his face past his hands, but I thanked him all the same. He simply nodded.

Next time, we would protect her—Callum and me together.

It was all for the sake of the princess.

FINAL CHAPTER:

The Prince Called God's Child

CEDRIC SILVA LOWELL, that was my name. The name of the man who received everything from God.

I remembered everything from the moment of my own birth on. No, I had memories even before it, when I shouldn't have been able to see yet. I'd always assumed it was the same for everyone.

I still remembered the first day I ever grasped language, and the amount of times my wet nurse's eyes widened when she heard me speak. Six years, one month, and three days after my birth, I would learn that ordinary people do something called "forgetting."

It was on my second birthday that I earned the ridiculous nickname "God's child." Everyone heaped praise on me for my "divine" talents and for the love God must have given me. It almost felt like they wanted to spite the devout country of Chinensis by calling me these things.

Once I learned enough language to communicate freely, I had to contend with the adults in my life. I could memorize things; I just couldn't understand them. But these adults didn't question that at all—they just treated me like a toy, a baby. The nickname "God's child" spread, becoming more widely known. And Bertrand, the seneschal at the time, started watching me closely.

All he taught me at first was how to speak and greet people as a member of royalty. To this day, I didn't know whether I had a real desire to study back then, despite how diligent I was at the time. As soon as I started to learn those things, everyone started treating me differently.

I was ordered to absorb every last bit of information in my studies. I still remembered every letter of every page in my books and even the number of wrinkles on Seneschal Bertrand's hands while he made me study.

All the people who became obsessed with an unusual toy like me started to neglect feeding me or giving me breaks. I still remember the exact number of times I ended up stuck in bed with a fever because of these oversights. I was

probably the only prince in history who almost died of starvation right there on castle property.

Afraid of being found out by my father, who was the king then, Seneschal Bertrand abused his powers to cement himself as the person who would watch over me. He'd stolen the role from Prime Minister Dario. I still wished I could forget the look on Prime Minister Dario's face when Seneschal Bertrand threatened to take away his wife, children, and position in the castle.

The seneschal called it "special lessons," but what he really did was silently kill the person I was when I was young. He beat me into a machine that could spit out whatever knowledge he required. I memorized and recited and memorized and recited until I fainted with exhaustion from his ceaseless exercises. Gradually, I came to believe that was really all I was good for.

At the time, I had nothing else to compare my life to. It became normal to me. When I saw my brother, father, or mother at formal Cercian ceremonies, I felt nothing for them. I knew we shared the same blood and that my brother would be the next king.

But he was "ordinary."

It was me, God's child, who was most fit to take the throne. At least, according to the adults constantly whispering such things in my ear.

Day after day, those old geezers toyed with me. But the person who finally saved me from that hell was...

"Stop it, you bastards! What the hell are you doing to my little brother?!"

"Elder Sister, I've brought Prince Cedric with me."

It was two days after the end of the defensive war. Tiara had left my room to speak with Mother by transmission when Stale knocked on my door. Arthur had traded shifts with Captain Callum, who was currently on duty as my imperial knight along with Captain Alan.

Stale invited Cedric into the room. The prince wore his usual flashy clothes and dazzling accessories. The gloomy expression on his face only worsened

when I sat up in bed.

“I’m sorry it took me so long to come see you,” he said. “I probably should have been the first one here.”

Stale offered him a seat by my bedside. Cedric took the chair somberly, accessories jingling as he sat. That familiar sound was a strange contrast to his melancholy tone.

“I know you were busy,” I replied. “You don’t need to apologize.”

I was the one who’d refused to meet with him on the first day, after all. But Cedric’s expression didn’t change when I attempted to reassure him. He squeezed his fists even tighter in his lap.

“How are your legs?”

“They’re almost back to normal. They don’t hurt anymore, and my right leg is already healed. My left leg will only take three or four more days.”

“Bro said that you’d be staying here until then.”

“That’s right. I’ll be returning to Freesia the day after I’m fully recovered.”

I was more accustomed to his halting way of speaking now. He hung his head, daring glances upward to make fleeting eye contact. “I see. I’m really grateful for everyone from Freesia. Especially you, Pride. I’ll...never be able to make it up to you.” He bowed his head even lower.

I felt so bad for forcing a prince into such an apologetic position. I told him to raise his head, and he sat up again, even if his head was still tilted downward.

“You worked really hard, didn’t you? I don’t know what happened exactly, but Tiara told me it was dangerous.”

Cedric’s shoulders lurched like he was suddenly afraid. He finally looked up to meet my eyes. “When...did you find out...about me?”

“You mean about your being ‘God’s child’?”

He flinched at my directness. He obviously hated that nickname. During the game, Cedric had said as much.

“‘God’s child.’ That worthless nickname made my brother suffer so much when

we were young.”

As the cocky character, Cedric never tried to hide his talent, but he never boasted of it either. The nickname “God’s child” had already spread throughout Freesia thanks to Cedric’s success in running the country for the year that his brother was sick. Here and now, Freesia knew nothing of that name. Stale and Arthur, who were listening to us, wouldn’t have a clue what I was talking about either.

King Yohan must have told Cedric that I knew of his nickname. No, even if he didn’t, I had implied that I knew of it many times already. When I explained that I saw it in a premonition, Cedric asked if that meant I knew in advance that he was going to fight on the battlefield. I shook my head, and his expression shifted to confusion.

“The vision I saw was even further off in the future,” I told him. “I just believed you could do it.”

Ever since Cedric decided to stand up on his own in the battle, I knew he was capable of the exact same things he achieved in the game, even without that tragedy in his life.

“Besides,” I began, staring into his burning eyes, “you were already prepared to fight when you set out for the battlefield, weren’t you?”

Not even Cedric would go running off into a war without the confidence to take up a weapon for himself. He must have arrived knowing full well of his capabilities as “God’s child.”

Cedric recoiled just slightly at my question, mouth clamped shut, but he eventually nodded in response. In the game, I’d appreciated Cedric’s incredible ability to copy the moves of other characters. He couldn’t beat the eyes or sword skills of Commander Arthur, of course—although that character did describe battling the game’s Cedric as akin to fighting multiple warriors at once.

“I’m sorry. I was always...”

“You apologize too much, Cedric.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at yet another attempted apology. His eyes widened, as if my reaction startled him, and I flashed a teasing smile.

“You sure made a scene before you left. I told you, I heard all about how hard you worked out there.”

“Just you watch me, Pride Royal Ivy!” That was what he’d said right before leaving the castle. The memory made me chuckle. I hadn’t gotten to see what he did after that, but I knew about it all the same. Cedric had fought his way to King Lance and slain a whole slew of enemies.

Cedric kept his mouth closed, apparently lost for words, but never tore his eyes away from me.

“Cedric,” I said with a smile, “do you really hate being ‘God’s child’?”

He remained silent, blinking his wide eyes at me. The Cedric from the game had kept his talent hidden for his brother’s sake. My precognition alone couldn’t explain how I knew this about him.

I didn’t press any further as I waited; I knew that question had already been a bit of a jab. Cedric just stood there squeezing his hands into fists and swallowing so hard I could see his throat bob.

“Yeah. I do.”

His voice emerged low and depressed, and his handsome face hardened. Cedric glared down at his own feet like his eyes could burn holes through them.

“I can memorize and reenact every single thing I see. That’s why they call me God’s child. But what good does that do?”

He stared at the palm of his hand, as though questioning its very existence, then squeezed that hand into a fist.

“I don’t deserve this power. That much I can say for sure.”

Cedric glowered at his own fist. He was clearly confident in his physical appearance, but no matter how much praise he received, no matter how much his brothers loved him, he always hated himself so deeply. His tragedy hadn’t even occurred in this world, yet he loved only the outside of himself—never the inside.

“That’s such a waste,” I said. The words slipped out before I could catch them.

Cedric nodded, his eyes still pointed toward the ground, and said, “Yeah, this

talent of mine will never—”

“No, not that.”

I wasn’t going to let him continue on with this misunderstanding unchallenged.

“Cedric, there’s no reason for the man you are *now* to hate your talents.”

His mouth fell open and stayed that way. He blinked at me like he could hardly understand what I’d just said.

I knew just how much Cedric was torturing himself. There had to be something more to the story than his power simply being a threat to his brother’s claim to the throne. Cedric had described old Lord Hanmu as having treated him like a toy. Maybe he didn’t have a single good memory of his talents. But still...

“You have a wonderful talent,” I said. “I’m certain that it will bring you happiness in the future.”

“What do you know?!” he cried. The confusion on his face twisted to anger.

“It’s all right. If I were God, and I had to choose between granting this talent to King Lance or you...I would definitely give it to you.”

Cedric’s expression froze partway between rage and surprise. His eyes were as wide as saucers, and I watched that fire roar to life in them again. But the thought I’d shared was a true one.

“You’re the kind of person who would rather give everything away before he took something from someone else,” I said. “You’d abandon everything if it meant protecting the people you care about.”

I set a hand against his cheek. He twitched away from my touch but didn’t back off completely.

“That’s why I would want to give you that talent. Someday, you’ll protect the people you care about, as well as yourself. That’s what your talent is for. It already helped out once, right?”

I was referring to his time on the battlefield. I knew he could protect others now rather than just relying on others protecting him.

“As for your brother’s qualifications to be the king... I’m sure you know even more of them than I do.”

Cedric clenched his jaw before nodding vigorously. His eyes blazed, even as wetness doused them. I smiled to myself—he was such an easy crier. I stroked his damp skin. All these years, the pure heart of his childhood must have remained unchanged.

“King Lance is truly a wonderful king,” I went on. “He was outstanding enough to beat out even ‘God’s child’ for that role. As his brother, I hope you’ll be the first to believe in that.”

His face, frozen with shock, gradually heated, going red in the cheeks. Then his handsome features contorted with pain. He hung his head to hide from me, but he couldn’t conceal that groan of pain. Cedric pressed his hands over his face and tore at his own bangs.

I stroked his back, listening to the choked noises coming out of his mouth. He wiped at his tears, trying to hide them, then covered both his mouth and eyes again. He was a crybaby, he was a show-off, and he was kind. All of those things were even truer today than when we first met.

“You’ve worked so hard. It will be all right.”

Cedric had spent all these years keeping the information in his brain locked away for the sake of his brothers. When I said those words to him, all those years of holding back shattered him at last, and he burst into sobs. His shoulders shuddered, and his choked cries echoed through the room.

With his back slumped, for a moment, he truly looked like a young child. I’d been stroking his back all this time, but now I set a hand on the top of his head. I began to stroke the bangs he was gripping with his hands, and that’s when I thought back to King Lance and King Yohan placing their hands on his head in just the same way.

Cedric had abandoned as much knowledge as he could, stopped his own development, relied on skewed information to get by. Still, he always tried to improve so he could be worthy of his brothers. He was truly like a large child. It must have been thanks to those two kings that he managed to preserve his naturally kindhearted and compassionate character for all these years.

“I know you’ll become someone just as wonderful as your older brothers.”

Someday this boy, the same age as me, grew up into a proper adult. Cedric nodded in response to my words, despite the hand I had on his head.

“I look forward to seeing that day,” I told him.

Time was finally going to start moving again for Cedric. He would surely catch up to the game version of himself very soon. After all, Cedric moved as fast as a hundred people combined.

Stay with Me

“**E**LDER SISTER, Tiara... It’s me,” I said as I knocked on the door. “Prince Leon and Val are with me too.”

It wasn’t Pride who invited me into the room, but Tiara. Pride had collapsed into a deep slumber after victory was assured in the war. Her personal maids had tucked her into bed. They watched over her now in the silent room. Tiara squeezed Pride’s hand from where she’d nestled beside her, watching over her as she slept.

Our arrival caused Tiara to sit up straighter in her chair. She offered us all a bow from her chair.

“How is she?” I asked.

“Fast asleep,” Tiara said.

My entourage and I stopped talking after that, trying not to disturb the sleeping princess.

Good. She’s actually resting.

It was a relief to see her sleeping at last. The last time I was with her in this room, she hadn’t even changed out of her armor yet. The scene before me now served as a stark reminder of how she tended to hide her exhaustion. As happy as I was to see her

resting, it pained me that she’d forced herself to keep going all this time.

I gestured for the other four guests to enter. A guard shut the door quietly behind them.

“Pride...”

Leon was the first to speak. I’d briefed him on most of what had happened to Pride during the war, but now he was seeing it in person for the first time. It contorted his handsome face with grief. He shuffled closer to where Pride slept on her back, so deeply exhausted she didn’t even stir at his approach. Her chest rose and fell with quiet breaths.

“She’s sound asleep,” Tiara told him with a smile, her voice as dainty as a bell.

Leon sighed with relief. The moment I’d told Leon about Pride’s broken leg, his whole face had darkened. Now he got to see for himself that she would make a full recovery even after watching over the entire war. It was so like Pride to courageously stay on the battlefield until the very end, injuries be damned.

“Hm, the color in her face is better than I expected,” Leon said. “Thanks for all your good work, you two.”

Leon smiled at the two men at Pride’s side: Captain Alan and Captain Callum, her imperial knights. Neither man responded. Perhaps they didn’t want to disturb Pride’s sleep, or perhaps they didn’t feel they deserved the praise since Pride had gotten injured. Either way, the captains simply stood up straight and tall, kept their hands behind their back, and bowed toward Leon.

Khemet and Sefekh came up next to stand between Leon and Tiara. They dragged Val with them, getting close enough to peer at Pride’s face.

“Mistress?”

“Are you alive?”

Tiara chuckled. “I’m glad to see you’re both all right!” she said, wrapping her arm around the children.

“Did you fight too, Tiara?”

“Are you hurt?”

Khemet and Sefekh questioned her in hushed voices, but Tiara’s expression had brightened the moment her friends had arrived.

Meanwhile, Val side-eyed the bed. He shifted his weight from foot to foot as he gazed at Pride. Val had spent the day racing around the country with his special power, so he had to be nearly as exhausted as the princess. Yet even he seemed relieved at the sight of Pride’s relaxed face. He let out an exasperated sigh.

He’d seen her leg before, and I hadn’t reported any other injuries to him. Still, he furrowed his brow and glared down at Pride, assessing her from the neck up

to make sure. Even then, she did not wake. Val looked like he wanted to tease her, but something in the princess's sleeping face halted him. Pride couldn't respond to the jab anyway.

I stood next to Tiara at Pride's bedside, silently watching this all unfold. My heart settled as I observed Pride's steady, calm breaths. I sighed and reached out to set my hand atop Tiara's where she held Pride's hand. Tiara's small hand was warmer than I expected.

Tiara relaxed her grip, giving me space. We held Pride's pale hand together, heating it up more effectively than any blanket. A smile slipped onto my face as the fatigue of the day seeped out of my body. I truly felt I could last three days and nights without rest if it meant protecting that peaceful look on Pride's face.

"I have more things to do, so I'll leave you here with her," I said. "Captain Alan, Captain Callum, please try to change shifts as soon as possible."

"We're fine here," both knights responded instantly.

I quirked an eyebrow at their unexpected refusal. I slid my hand away from Pride's to adjust my glasses and peer at the knights. I never thought they'd actually refuse the order. Alan was the captain of the First Squadron, whereas Callum was the captain of the Third. They would have continued receiving reports about the end of the war up until the point when Pride finally changed out of her armor. Yet they couldn't possibly have gotten any direct reports from their own units.

Alan had left the First Squadron in the hands of Eric, his vice captain, while Callum had put the captain of the Fourth Squadron in charge of his own unit. However, these replacements couldn't stand in for the actual captains forever. That was why I'd encouraged them to swap out with Arthur and Eric, or at least other knights who knew of the situation, but Callum and Alan had made up their minds.

"We ask your permission to stay and guard Princess Pride," Captain Callum said.

"We don't need a break," Captain Alan chimed in. "Please feel free to dismiss us if you feel we aren't serving our purpose here."

It was like this was their final duty as knights or something. No matter how many hours or days passed, they refused to move until Pride's safety was assured.

Their firm and earnest gazes left me silent for a moment. "Very well," I finally said. I understood exactly how much responsibility they felt over Pride's injury. In light of that, I couldn't possibly force them to stand down. I myself had gotten pretty emotional over the matter.

The two captains bowed their heads in appreciation. Leon glanced at them, clearly trying to sort out the situation for himself. As the prince of Anemone, he would understand the difficulty of their position. However, he also knew that the kindhearted Pride would never dismiss these men from her service over something like that.

"Prince Stale, may I stay here for a while too?" Leon asked me. "I would like to see her awaken before I return home."

Apparently, he also wanted to confirm that Pride was unharmed while he was still here. Perhaps he also wanted to speak with her now that the war had concluded. The look on his face was more like he couldn't bear to leave her side till she awakened, though.

I agreed to the request. Pride's knights and Tiara would be with Leon too, after all. Even without that, I felt that I could trust this man—Pride's sworn friend. He'd rushed into this war to aid us, and I knew Big Sister would be eager to see him when she awoke.

I informed Mary and Lotte, the maids standing in a corner of the room, that I would return them to Freesia. I'd only called them here to help Pride change clothes, but now their more important task was watching over her room back in Freesia.

The women agreed with one last look at Pride. The softness in their eyes belied their reluctance to leave her, but they had duties of their own. They took my hands in preparation to teleport, and I flashed them a smile.

"What about you, Val? Are you staying or leaving?" I asked after I'd teleported the maids away, dropping back into my usual deadpan expression.

I'd been the one to give Val and Leon permission to visit Pride. I knew Val was worried about her, but I didn't know if he had ulterior motives as well.

Val scowled and cocked his head, clicking his tongue in irritation. Finally, he responded by jabbing a finger at the children.

"I want to wait with them until she wakes up!" Khemet cried.

"Me too!" Sefekh said.

Unlike Val, they were upfront with their desires. Their faces creased with concern for Pride. Even their little shouts weren't enough to awaken her from her deep slumber.

Val kept pointing at them as he muttered, "How can I leave with them actin' like this?"

He mumbled some further complaint to himself. I only caught a snippet of it—something regarding how the kids wouldn't shut up about how worried they were. Leon glanced over at Val, a bemused smile on his lips that told me Val would probably have stayed here regardless of the children.

"Fine," I said with a sigh, letting my head droop and pushing up my glasses. Unlike Leon, I worried about leaving Val alone with the sleeping Pride, but having two imperial knights here eased my mind. I could also simply order Val to do nothing but watch over her from the side of her bed. Still...

"Don't cross a line with her while I'm gone," I warned him.

"Shut it. This is no time for that. Just get goin' already."

Val shooed me away like I was a dog and clicked his tongue again. I'd given him that order just to be safe. Val could snap all he liked, but my order would hold him once I left the room...though he could technically do whatever he wanted while I was still here. Thankfully, Val didn't appear to be in the mood to make the obvious joke.

With one last threatening glare at him, I bid everyone else farewell. I had a lot of work to do if I wanted Pride to wake up free of worries.

I watched the door shut quietly behind Stale, then turned my gaze back to my

sworn friend, deeply asleep in her bed. Seeing her peaceful breaths reassured me, but I would wait as long as it took for her to awaken. I missed her usual smile, delicate as a flower, but there was something lovely about the serene look on her face as she rested at last. I couldn't help smiling.

Captain Callum brought me a chair, but I refused it. I was just as exhausted as Val, but standing gave me the perfect vantage point from which to gaze upon her. Compared to Pride, who refused to take any time off during the war despite her injuries, my fatigue was insignificant. This war must have taken so much more of a toll on her, much more than any of my own efforts. I'd escaped the fighting completely unharmed.

"Hey, when do you think she's gonna wake up?!" Sefekh whined.

"Sefekh, you can't talk right now," Khemet said. "We have to let her rest because she's tired."

As soon as the room fell silent again, Sefekh cocked her head at Pride. The little girl looked at Pride like she was a doll, perfectly still and beautiful. She even started leaning closer, until Khemet stopped her.

Tiara giggled at the whole exchange. It was a relief to see *her* looking more relaxed too. She'd been tense when we arrived, reluctant to leave her sister's side. The arrival of these two children had improved her mood significantly.

"Let's wait for her to wake up," she whispered.

Khemet and Sefekh nodded obediently. They knelt on the carpeted floor at Pride's bedside, leaning their elbows up on the bed and settling in for a long wait.

"How cute," I murmured to myself.

"What'd you just say?" Val asked, raising his eyebrow.

I smiled at his questioning look, and all the pain that had seized my chest after my first sight of Pride ebbed away. Tiara and the knights also noticed my changed demeanor. I simply continued smiling, unabashed by their scrutiny.

"I've never seen Pride asleep before," I said.

Even though she's seen me, I added silently.

Tiara appeared to ponder my quiet words. She cast her eyes downward and squeezed her lips together. I knew she was thinking about how Pride and I were once engaged, however briefly.

My chest ached at the thought of Pride's leg underneath the blankets, but tenderness welled up to replace it when I reflected on how Pride had fulfilled her role to the very end, even after her injury—an injury she earned from saving a Cercian guard, not even a member of her homeland. She only seemed to get hurt when trying to save someone else. I myself had been rescued by her, a fact that still made my heart flutter in my chest.

I'm not capable of doing things like that.

I dared not voice those kinds of thoughts. I crossed my arms over my chest to keep from revealing my inner awe. It wasn't mere humility; Pride genuinely did things I couldn't possibly match.

If it were a citizen of Anemone who was in danger on the battlefield, I most likely would have leapt out to save them. I couldn't just sit back and watch something happen to my beloved Anemonian people. However, it was a different story when it came to citizens of other countries, especially countries Anemone had only just formed an alliance with.

As royalty—and the crown prince of Anemone, at that—I wasn't supposed to risk my life or expose myself to danger, not even for the sake of my country or people. That was a fact of life, something that had been instilled in me early on as a member of the royal family. People like me weren't supposed to put our lives on the line for a single civilian. Still, I would certainly take the risk for an Anemonian.

Yet Pride went above and beyond that, rushing into danger to save an unrelated commoner from another country and getting hurt in the process. I knew she didn't expect anything in return from that guard, the same way she hadn't expected anything from me when coming to my rescue.

That woman fought for her country and people to the very end. This aspect of her personality was so beautiful and dear to me. She would put her life on the line for anyone who needed her, regardless of their background. But no matter how much I respected that, I also hated seeing such a kindhearted woman in

dangerous situations.

Members of royalty were not supposed to suffer injuries. Our bodies existed not just for ourselves, but for our countries and people too. That was why I'd arrived at this defensive war with every possible precaution in place. Even now, in this highly secure room, I didn't remove my armor and kick back. Until the danger had fully passed, I had to prioritize my own safety.

Besides, where was Pride even getting any kind of battle prowess? She was a princess! Her station only made me feel more strongly that such a noble person, one adored and protected by the finest of knights, should avoid all hardship and suffering. Certainly no other member of royalty encountered the kinds of hardships Pride did.

More than anything, I didn't want her to get hurt. I didn't want her to be sad. She should fall asleep every night wearing a peaceful smile and wake every morning with that same serene look. I wanted her to retain her strong will without putting herself in danger, even when she was only rushing toward peril to save someone else.

But that wasn't the woman I loved. Those compassionate, merciful traits of hers were exactly why I felt the way I did.

"I really do love..."

The words fell from my lips, rippling throughout the room like a stone thrown into a still pond. I touched my mouth when I realized I'd spoken aloud. Had I really said that out loud? I risked a look at the others and found everyone—Princess Tiara, Sefekh, Khemet, even the imperial knights—staring at me, wide-eyed. Val merely raised an eyebrow, looking more annoyed than anything else. I tried flashing a charming smile.

"...the way she looks when she sleeps," I finished. "Of course, I love when she's awake and smiling too."

It wasn't exactly a lie. I looked at each person in turn as I spoke. One in particular replied with a click of his tongue, but the rest of them smiled approvingly. Silent relief flooded through me, and I returned my gaze to Pride. I couldn't actually tell them that while I didn't want her to get hurt, I loved her willingness to put herself in danger for the sake of others. Everyone else in this

room was so worried about her; they wouldn't like me praising her for putting her life at risk.

Besides, I didn't entirely disagree. Pride *did* deserve some criticism for her rash actions. All of these people had suffered—overworking themselves, staying in this room for as long as it took—all because of Pride's injury. Even if I wasn't qualified to be her fiancé, there were still plenty of ways I could help her as her sworn friend.

Watching her as she slept, I closed my mouth and didn't say anything else, musing over what I'd say once she awoke. There was so much I wanted to tell her, things that had nothing to do with my own efforts during the war.

“Khemet. Sefekh.”

When the minute hand of the clock had made one full turn, I broke the silence in the room. I'd been standing at the back of the group all this time, but I sauntered forward. My destination wasn't Pride's bedside, but the wall instead.

I leaned my mailbag against the wall and slid to the floor with a thump. Crossing my legs and leaning back, I fixed my harsh gaze on the two kids next to Leon and Tiara.

Khemet and Sefekh recognized the look and came to me. I sighed in irritation when they rubbed at their bleary eyes. They were clearly exhausted, struggling just to keep their peepers open as they pushed themselves past their usual limits.

I knew they would probably be drooling on the sheets soon if I left them leaning on the bed like that. I didn't really care about a bit of spit, but if they fell asleep there, it meant I would have to stand next to Leon at Pride's bedside for hours until she woke up. How ridiculous; there was no way I was doing that. I had to change locations while I still had time. Pride was asleep anyway, so there was no point in spending all that time at her bedside with nothing to do. I joined Khemet and Sefekh in looking at Pride for a while, but the princess never once changed her expression, talked in her sleep, or made any noises at all. It was all so damn boring.



I'm sick of staring at a sleeping brat. Might as well relax till she wakes up instead. Khemet and Sefekh sat down at my sides and slumped against me, using me as a pillow. I didn't even have the energy to complain about it, though. The brats had to be completely trashed after such a long day of work.

Leaning against me with their legs stretched out, they each took a deep breath and drooped with exhaustion. I knew they were worried about Pride, but from here they could still watch her sleep. They seemed to be scoping out the younger princess, Tiara, who gripped Pride's hand and sadly watched her.

The silence of the room was so jarring after all the chaos and noise of the battlefield. The brats weren't the only ones feeling sleepy because of it; even my eyelids were growing heavy. Plus, they were so warm all curled up against me.

Sefekh and Khemet's breathing evened out as they succumbed to sleep. They were snoozing loud enough for everyone to hear, though. I clicked my tongue at them, then set my hands behind my head and reclined against the wall. I could see Pride from where I sat. Still relaxed, still not moving. I clicked my tongue again. Maybe she should just stay that way for the next three days or so. I couldn't think of a time before this when I'd actually seen her rest.

Where's my thanks for helpin' you as much as I did?

I glared at the sleeping princess. The moment I'd entered the room and found her like this, it had improved my mood. *Why am I so annoyed, then?* She slept so deeply she might as well be dead. That was how much she'd overworked herself. I shook my head. Royalty usually lived easy, safe lives looking down on everyone else from above. But Pride spent the entire war wearing her heavy armor and wading into the battle herself.

I could imagine how every little twist and turn in the war must have affected her. So annoying. The first person Pride heavily relied on wasn't the foreign soldiers, Anemone's reinforcements, her knights, or even me—the criminal trapped in a fealty contract. Yet I knew she'd wake up with no regrets whatsoever. And still I could perfectly picture that horrible moment in my mind. She had messed up both of her legs. Her face was twisted with pain. Sweat dripped from her brow.

“I’m only doin’ this kinda thing once in a billion years.”

Now, looking at her from a distance, I felt the truth of that statement more than ever. I usually addressed Pride with sarcasm, but even I couldn’t tell what I really meant and what was just a joke. When Cedric visited the castle, I’d told her it felt like I hadn’t gotten to see her in a thousand years, but sometimes it really *did* feel that long.

This had been the most miserable wait yet. Pride had been injured, unable to stand on her own, but she’d ordered a criminal like me to go off and rescue others instead. I knew the whole time she was refusing to rest, but I couldn’t go see her until the very end. That stretch of time had felt like forever.

A tug on my sleeve yanked me from my thoughts. I looked down to find a half-awake Khemet peering up at me.

“Val...aren’t you...sleep?”

Translation: *“Val, aren’t you going to sleep?”*

Heh. The brat saw right through me. He knew I was just as worn out as him and his sister.

I scratched at my head, then rested it against Khemet’s. I mussed his messy black hair with one brown hand and said, “Go to sleep.” Then I flicked my gaze back to Pride. Khemet closed his sleepy eyes again as ordered.

Since I knew Khemet and Sefekh were worried about her, I decided not to leave the room until Pride was awake. But we were still in a war zone, even if this bedroom belonged to a princess. The castle itself was an easy target for enemies. I’d traveled here plenty of times for deliveries, only to be turned away at the gates. I definitely couldn’t let my guard down yet. I was a delivery man, not someone with status like Pride or the knights. I made up my mind not to sleep until Sefekh and Khemet were completely awake again. Since Pride was in this room, other members of royalty might visit. Unfortunately, Hanazuo had two royal families, which only raised those chances. My contract forced me to act politely in front of all members of royalty, aside from a very small group that included Pride, so I wouldn’t be able to ditch if someone important showed up. It was easy to run as long as I had an open window I could leap out of. My special power would take care of the rest. But if I did that...I wouldn’t be able to

watch over Pride.

“So damn annoying.”

My stomach clenched, like something inside me was boiling. I muttered to myself and stayed put.

The ticking of the clock was the only sound in that room then. Nobody spoke as they watched the slumbering princess. Even after the sun had fully set, we continued to sit there waiting for Pride to wake up.

“Is your break over already?”

No, that's not it!

I wanted to deny it, but my shoulders jerked at Princess Pride's question. Tiara leaned closer to get a better look, while I continued to tuck my hair behind my ear in a nervous motion.

Leon had only recently departed, Stale told me when he brought me to Princess Pride. I'd tried to excuse myself from the room when I saw her, but the princess said she was sad I had to leave so soon. I, on the other hand, was waging a silent battle against the warmth trying to crawl up my neck when she smiled at me.

“Um, I still have time,” I said. “I just don't feel like I can stay in Your Highness's room forever. So now that I've seen you, I should get back to the Eighth Squadron and rest up.”

“If you're going to rest anyway, why don't you do it here?” she asked. “I want to talk to you a little more.” Princess Pride chuckled. Was she aware of how greedy her request was? Did she actually want me to stay longer after we'd been separated for so long?

“There's a nice sofa over there,” Stale added, gesturing at a place to nap. The sofa looked way better than the cots the royal order provided. Problem was, I would cover the fancy furniture in dirt and grime the moment I laid down on it.

“No, I can't...” I mumbled, glancing over at Captain Alan and Captain Callum, who were standing at Princess Pride's bedside.

I half expected them to say something about all this, but the two remained completely silent and wouldn't even meet my gaze. From his spot on the wall, Val scowled at me, like he was annoyed by my hesitation to accept. I could almost hear him saying, *She's not askin' you to get in bed with her, so stop freaking out.* Thankfully, Khemet and Sefekh sat slumped against his sides, sound asleep, so he didn't speak up and risk waking them.

"A-all right, then! I'll stay here a little longer," I said, forcing myself to stand up straighter.

"Please do," said Princess Pride with a smile.

I was still struggling to meet her eyes.

"Can I stay with you a little longer too, Pride? I just got a break," Stale said.

"M-me too," Tiara chimed in. "I'll stay with you until you're sleepy! I want to talk with you all as well."

"Thank you, but let's keep our voices down," Princess Pride told them.

She cast a look at Sefekh and Khemet against the wall. She hadn't been able to speak to them yet, loath to wake them from a sleep the children clearly needed.

Tiara's eyes went wide, and she covered her mouth with both hands. "Sorry!" she whispered.

It was technically bedtime, but Princess Pride and Princess Tiara had just woken up from their naps. Stale and I were too jittery with the lingering adrenaline of the battlefield to sleep. Tiara glanced at the clock like a misbehaving child about to be scolded for missing her bedtime. I was probably the most tired out of everyone, and Tiara offered me a chair, but I turned it down. I still hadn't bathed after the battle. Dirt, smoke, and blood splattered my skin and clothing.

"I'm really sorry to come here looking like this. When I heard what happened to you, I wanted to get here as soon as possible."

"There's nothing you need to apologize for," Princess Pride said. "I wanted to see you as soon as possible too. I'm sure things haven't been easy for you."

She looked at me as if she could picture my deeds on the battlefield perfectly. She'd had to stay here and watch over things with King Yohan, while the other knights and I were out there cutting down our enemies.

I bowed deeply in response to her gratitude. There were so many things I wanted to say. It would have taken me all night to get through it. I'd discussed my training, expeditions, and duties with them before, but now, in just a single day, I had far more to tell them than I could possibly manage. Stale had teleported me to the northern front in time for me to fight alongside my father, and I'd protected my injured comrades, guarded the commander, and even received direct orders from Dad. And then Vice Captain Eric—

I got that far in my thoughts before I clamped my mouth shut.

Princess Pride leaned toward me, evidently concerned by my gloomy face. Even Princess Tiara and Stale took a closer look. Stale pressed at the frames of his black glasses. He seemed to be analyzing my expression, trying to pick it apart. Surely he knew there'd been no fatalities among the knights. But he also knew that I'd fought on the front lines and seen the war up close and personal.

I dragged in a deep breath and shot a look at Captain Alan, who stood next to the bed. He swallowed, perhaps picturing the news I had to deliver already. Captain Callum scrubbed a hand through his hair, looking between me and Captain Alan.

"All the knights fought so well," I began. "Everyone knows that, but seriously, I didn't compare to any of 'em."

I slowly fell to one knee. I smiled up at Pride, but couldn't quite shake the despondent slump of my shoulders. This was a perfectly natural position for a knight to be in before a princess.

Princess Pride was looking straight down at me. I clenched and unclenched my right hand. I could feel the other two knights staring intently at me.

"I learned that I don't have nearly enough experience when it comes to things like first aid and accurate diagnoses."

"First Squadron." "Vice Captain." "Injury." "Shooting."

I spoke slowly, but moved my hand quickly and precisely, using hand signals

to communicate with the other two knights in the room. Right now, I wanted Princess Pride to focus solely on her own injury and recovery, but I needed to tell Captain Alan about what had happened in the battle, since he couldn't return to headquarters yet. The knights' eyes widened as they watched my hand signals.

They knew full well I was referring to Vice Captain Eric. He'd been injured in a shooting. Captain Alan's face went pale at the news. I was careful to use the word "injury" specifically, an indication that the vice captain was still alive, just hurt. Still, "injury" was a heavy word. It didn't necessarily mean Vice Captain Eric was entirely safe. I pressed my palm against the side of my body, indicating the place where Vice Captain Eric had been shot. The Seventh Squadron was fortunately on-site to help, but even with them there, an injury in that location could produce a lot of blood.

"That's not true," said Princess Pride, who couldn't see my hand signals.

I tried to smile at her, but I don't think I hid my distress fully. I gripped my side, the place where Vice Captain Eric had gotten injured, scratching down on it in my anxiety.

"We didn't win just by cutting people down," I said. "I had to keep an eye on the other knights, and if I ran forward without protecting them, they could have died. If a knight gets hurt, you have to keep a calm head, or you'll fall into the enemy's traps. I thought I knew all this stuff, but I just wasn't prepared enough."

"Conscious." "Speaking." "Treatment concluded."

"That's why my senior knights are all so amazing."

"Commander." "Protect." "Proxy."

I smiled through the strain of communicating two different messages. I used my hand to finish explaining Vice Captain Eric's condition before placing it back down at my side. Vice Captain Eric was conscious and speaking, and he had finished with his medical treatment. He'd gotten injured protecting our commander. This was what I communicated to the captains.

Captain Alan seemed to be fighting back a sigh of relief. Getting injured in

service of protecting the commander was an honor. Nothing shameful about it. It was also expected from someone like Vice Captain Eric, who was good at looking at the bigger picture while on the battlefield.

Hopefully, Captain Alan wouldn't reprimand Vice Captain Eric the next time they saw each other, but I could just picture him saying something like, *"You can't go getting hit after I leave you in charge of the First Squadron,"* or *"Why couldn't you dodge the bullet too?"* Captain Alan had to have committed plenty of mistakes himself; perhaps he wasn't really in a position to criticize. The First Squadron paved the way forward for the others, and given that Vice Captain Eric led them, his injury and removal from the battlefield wouldn't normally be deserving of praise. But the person he'd protected was our commander—the commander who led the troops to victory. That was deserving of every commendation and honor.

Besides, Vice Captain Eric still seemed to regret that day six years ago, when he was a new recruit who'd had to flee from the battle instead of trying to rescue Dad. This accomplishment was something worth celebrating. Vice Captain Eric had led the First Squadron well in Captain Alan's stead.

Captain Callum's shoulders slumped a bit too, having learned of Vice Captain Eric's survival and commendable injury. Vice Captain Eric belonged to a different unit than Captain Callum, but the latter knew just as well as anyone how Vice Captain Eric looked up to Captain Alan and wanted to follow in his footsteps.

This injury *did* put some extra pressure on me and the captains in the short term. Vice Captain Eric wouldn't be able to take his shift as imperial knight while he healed up. Our duties would be more important than ever. There were others who might be able to succeed the captains in their normal duties, like the Vice Captain of the Third Squadron back in Freesia, but in the interim we'd all be working even harder to protect Princess Pride.

"Arthur, you did a lot out there," Stale said. "I'm not going to let you act like all our sparring meant nothing."

Stale wasn't about to let me hide behind praise for the other knights today, apparently. He'd heard the reports of how I'd teamed up with Dad to help

evacuate all of our knights back up to the clifftops. It stood to reason that I'd held my own out there.

I burst into laughter, smiling genuinely for the first time that day. I put my hand on my knee and leaned forward to cover up my smile before straightening out again. I shot Stale a playful glare and mouthed the word "moron."

"Not one of those enemies was stronger than you," I replied. "I never came close to losing or being overwhelmed."

Stale smiled, satisfied by my boast. "I figured. We'd have a problem if that wasn't the case." He pressed his glasses back up on his nose, as though he'd never once doubted my accomplishments on the battlefield. To him, this was the most natural conclusion in the world.

I mostly sat back and listened to the conversation going on around me, until I recalled something and looked to my little sister, sitting beside me in the bed where I was still propped up while I healed.

"By the way, how did things go with Cedric?" I asked. "You two traveled together, right?"

Tiara stiffened in response. I blinked at the look on my sister's face. I thought about the way she'd lashed out at Cedric back at the castle gates. After all the growth Cedric had gone through, surely he hadn't chosen the middle of a battlefield as the right time to be rude to Tiara...

"Tiara?" I prompted, suddenly nervous.

Tiara puffed out her cheeks, raised her shoulders, and huffed through her nose. "He made things so dangerous!" With a harrumph, Tiara pursed her lips and shook her head.

I had to bite back a smile. "What happened?"

Tiara scrunched up her tiny eyebrows. "He just made things really, really dangerous! He scared me so bad!"

I broke out into a cold sweat, realizing that Tiara truly had no praise for him at all. I'd heard from Captain Callum that Cedric returned from the battle safely, so

why was Tiara so upset? Maybe Cedric had rushed off to fight enemies on his own, which actually seemed possible if he was chasing after his brother, Lance. Now that Cedric had accepted being “God’s child,” he certainly had the potential to do something like that. After all, he’d seen how our Freesian knights fought—as well as me with my last boss cheats.

“So, so dangerous!” Tiara repeated as she slammed her balled-up fists into the bed. She seemed frightened by the mere memory of what she’d seen.

According to Tiara, Cedric had borrowed the jumping power of a knight to launch up into the air and strike down a blimp he couldn’t even see. Cedric himself admitted he’d never even touched a sword before. Seeing him launch at the enemy like that had to be terrifying. It would have been far safer if he’d hung back or at least admitted it if he’d been trained in swordplay already. Tiara also said Cedric watched her throw her knives and immediately picked up the technique for himself. That had to be frustrating after how many years Tiara had spent secretly mastering the art. In summation, it sounded like Cedric had been extremely reckless, chatting and smiling casually all the while.

He even said, “I always wanted a beauty like Pride too.”

“Ugh! I don’t care about him anymore,” Tiara said. “He was such a danger magnet. I wouldn’t have been able to take my eye off him if the knights weren’t around.”

Tiara continued to smack her fists against the soft bed and mutter to herself. I didn’t press any the topic any further. Instead, I simply said, “I see...” and tried to keep a smile on my face.

“You must have worked hard. Thank you for watching over him,” I said, reaching out to stroke my sister’s hair.

Tiara calmed at the praise, although her cheeks remained slightly puffed. She scooted closer to rest her head against me and make it easier for me to keep combing my fingers through her blonde locks.

Knock-knock.

Everyone turned to look at the sudden sound. Arthur, whom Stale had teleported into the room, stood up a bit more prim and proper at the threat of

a guest. He glanced at Stale as though nervous he might have to be teleported away quickly.

“Pardon the interruption. It’s me, Gilbert,” the voice on the other side of the door said.

The guards opened the door to admit the prime minister, who entered with a murmur of “Oh my,” but there was no actual surprise on his face as he took in the scene before him. He bowed to us as the guards shut the door again.

“Forgive the intrusion,” he said. “I see you’re all together. Even you, Sir Arthur.”

He scanned those present, from Val glaring at him against the wall to Arthur standing up straight at my bedside. He seemed to be making a mental note of everyone’s position, but the only people who caused any flicker of surprise from him were Khemet and Sefekh, still asleep at Val’s sides.

“I’m so glad to see you’re awake,” Gilbert greeted me with a smile.

“What do you want, Gilbert? Didn’t I leave you in charge?” Stale asked him.

“Yes, and I apologize,” Gilbert said coolly. “I simply wanted to leave this here, as I heard Her Highness had awakened.”

Gilbert kept his composure in the face of Stale’s cold glare. He approached me, three books nestled under his arm, and set the tomes out on my bedside table.

“Resting is the most important thing you can do right now, but I thought you might be bored in here, so I borrowed some rare books for you to read. Perhaps it was unnecessary, seeing as you have guests.”

He looked around the room with a chuckle. It was kind of him to go find books for me once he’d heard that I’d woken back up. However, Gilbert seemed more bemused by the crowd in my room at the moment.

“I was going to leave them with the guard outside your door, but I heard you speaking in here.”

Tiara slapped her hands over her mouth, finally realizing how heated she’d gotten when talking about Cedric. She shot a nervous look at Sefekh and

Khemet, but the children still slept soundly. Val, pinned between the two children, scowled wordlessly at Gilbert.

“Thank you. I really appreciate it,” I said.

More than the stack of books itself, I appreciated Gilbert’s kindness. At my smile, Gilbert bowed to me again.

“Please rest well. I will be hard at work until Prince Stale is able to return.”

“Don’t work too hard, Prime Minister.” It was unfair of him to be tiring himself out while I was still resting in bed. “I’m sorry. I know I’m the person who really should be doing things right now...”

“Of course not. You’ve done more than enough, Your Highness. You too, Princess Tiara and Prince Stale. You’ve all been much busier than I have.”

Something flashed through his light blue eyes at that, but Tiara and I merely thanked him again. Stale held his silence, turning his head away from the prime minister. He’d kept his arms crossed ever since Gilbert entered the room, apparently at a loss for how to respond, though his displeasure was plain to see.

“Anyway, how are Cercis and Chinensis doing at the moment?” I asked, knowing that as prime minister, Gilbert would have the latest information. But Gilbert simply shook his head.

“Please just rest for now without thinking of anything too heavy. Leave all of that up to me.”

I could do little but nod. I would have to rely on Captain Callum and Stale for information. Clearly Gilbert had brought me these books as a distraction.

With that, he stood up straight once more. He bid us all farewell, headed for the door, and set his hand on the knob. Then he turned back to us once more.

“Sir Arthur, would you mind joining me?” he asked.

“Ah, sure...”

Arthur blanched at the invitation. He seemed about to bow and apologize, but before he could, Gilbert gestured him forward.

“Please don’t worry. Only guards and soldiers are in the hall at the moment,

not knights.”

Arthur’s eyes were wide, but he nodded and followed Prime Minister Gilbert out of my room.

“Princess Tiara is in the next room over, while Prince Stale has been given the room three doors down,” Prime Minister Gilbert said. “There are guards stationed outside each door, so feel free to check with them to be sure you have the right room.”

I had no idea why he was telling me all this, so I offered a simple response. As a knight, it was important for me to know which rooms the royal family were using, but other knights would probably get assigned to guard these places, so I didn’t see the point of Prime Minister Gilbert’s explanation.

At the same time, I couldn’t question the prime minister’s motivation directly. I was getting special permission just to be here. Instead, I simply noted the location of the two doors and confirmed that I understood.

“Thank you. You’ve done so well today,” Prime Minister Gilbert said, smiling with satisfaction. He offered me a deep bow. “I’m so glad you made it back safely.” Then he lowered his voice. “If you’re truly tired, then please mention my name. You can say I asked you to do something for me. That way, you’ll be able to go get some rest. Of course, I don’t mind if you use this sofa either, since I trust you.”

The smile on Prime Minister Gilbert’s face imbued the phrase “use my name” with extra meaning.

“No, that’s all right! But thank you for your consideration!” Sweat dripped down my brow, and I bowed. Princess Pride and the others had been worried about whether or not I was getting any sleep. And now the prime minister was leveraging his station and authority as an excuse for me to sneak off and catch some shut-eye. I couldn’t possibly accept that. I just kept thanking the prime minister as he finally headed off in the other direction. *Is this why he came to Princess Pride’s room? Not to deliver books but to get me to take a break?*

Once the prime minister disappeared down the hall, I returned to Pride’s

room. I cringed at the thought that they'd finally realize I'd left the room without ever actually going in through the door, but luckily the guards must have changed shifts at some point because different soldiers guarded the door now. We exchanged bows as they let me back in.

The others immediately asked what Prime Minister Gilbert had wanted from me, but I couldn't possibly say that he'd offered me an excuse to slack off. "It was nothing," I told them, avoiding their eyes. "He was just looking out for me. Anyway, are you sure you guys don't want to rest?"

I'd been loitering here way too long, but I didn't feel like leaving them just to get some sleep. I wanted to stay with them. As a knight, I was also used to sleep deprivation. I still had plenty of adrenaline from all that fighting, so the fatigue hadn't hit me yet. I could probably stay awake all night long if it meant I got to see Princess Pride. I was more concerned about her, since she wasn't as used to being on a battlefield as I was.

"I already slept earlier," Princess Pride replied. She smiled awkwardly, since she was obviously the most well rested out of our whole group.

"I'm all right!" Princess Tiara cried, squeezing her fists to show that she had energy.

Stale adjusted his glasses and regarded me with alert eyes. "You should sleep a little longer, Pride. You're injured, after all, and your body needs to recover."

Her shoulders slumped in response. "You're right," she said, settling back down in the bed. "I'm sorry I kept you here, Arthur. I'm sure you want to get some rest too. You should probably—"

"No, that's not what I meant!" I cut in. "Really, I'm totally fine! Knights are used to it."

I couldn't have her thinking I was trying to get away so I could snooze.

"Then will you stay and talk with me a bit more?" she asked. She'd laid down fully in her bed, looking content and cozy as she regarded the group around her. Stale and I had plenty of time left on our breaks. She took a deep breath, looking like she wanted to ask us if we'd stay until she drifted off...

Almost immediately, the princess fell back into a deep slumber. I eyed her as

Stale slung an arm around me, his brow furrowed into a sterner scowl than usual. Thus, I left Princess Pride in Captain Alan and Captain Callum's care.

"Please look after her from here on out."

The moment Stale and I said we were heading out, Princess Tiara slumped down in bed as well, too exhausted to even say goodnight to us. We shot Val a warning glare before deciding to carry Princess Tiara to the sofa so she could sleep properly. I would have loved to take her back to her room, which Prime Minister Gilbert had shown me, but I couldn't possibly separate her from her sister.

With the princesses settled, Stale finally let his own fatigue show. I urged him to take a nap.

"Twenty minutes," Stale said. "I'll nap for twenty minutes, but then I have more work to do as Elder Sister's proxy. I can't let Gilbert take care of it all..."

"I know. Just get some sleep, or you'll be the next to collapse."

Stale was clearly forcing his eyes to stay open. I bid the imperial knights farewell and announced I'd go regroup with the order. They thanked me as they bid me goodbye. Once again, the room fell silent.

Just before I left, I got to glimpse the peaceful smile of the firstborn princess as she fell into her second slumber of the night.

Things That Have to Be Said

“SO...WHAT should we do now?”

I was the one to break the silence as Callum and I sat behind the church. Callum understood what I was asking immediately. He scrubbed a hand nervously through his messy bangs.

It was the day after the defensive war. Callum and I had been ordered to rest, so we put some distance between ourselves and the rest of the royal order.

“We can’t go back when we look like this,” I said.

He didn’t disagree. Neither of us felt comfortable going back to the order after how we’d failed to keep Princess Pride safe in the battle. We couldn’t stay here forever. Someone would find us eventually. But we also weren’t comfortable facing our fellow knights yet.

“If the order sees your face like that, you’ll have all the junior knights worried about you, not just the Third Squadron,” I told him.

“Like you’re one to talk,” Callum shot back.

“Yeah?” I cocked my head in question. I had my own supporters in the order, but Callum constantly looked after the younger

knights and was the first to offer them help and advice. They would be worried about him.

He started to suggest we go find a place to clean up, but then a creaking noise sounded behind us. We spun to find the Chinensian minister entering the church. His daily work included praying and managing the bells, so that wasn’t too unusual.

“Excuse us!” I called out to him, lifting my hand.

“Alan, what are you—?!”

The minister startled at the sight of us, but he relaxed once he realized we were Freesians. Callum looked like he wanted to hide, but I strode right up to the man and laid out my proposal.

The minister's response basically boiled down to: "I see... Very well, just for the two of you." He then opened up the door to the sanctuary for us. I bowed and thanked him, then jogged back to Callum.

"He's gonna let us rest in here for a while," I said with a cackle.

Callum covered his face with his hands and slouched. He seemed in disbelief that I'd enter a foreign country's holy space in my disastrous current state, but he didn't voice his concerns.

"Are there any words we should say or rituals we should do when we enter?" I asked.

"Just get out of that dirty uniform already," Callum grumbled, tugging on my sleeve.

We removed our dirty jackets and folded them up. Callum thanked and apologized to the minister again, then closed the door from the inside and locked us in. Callum stared at me like I was his savior, but really, I was just that determined to see this through.

Afterword

HELLO, THIS IS TENICHI. Thank you very much for purchasing this book.

It's thanks to all my readers that we've finally reached the end of the defensive campaign. This book covered the story of the war, and I wrote about all the major players in the battle.

I also have a wonderful announcement to make about my authorship of this series: I'm going to be writing a continuation to Last Boss Queen titled *The Defensive Campaign: Behind the Scenes*.

Of course, I still intend to write a follow-up to this book. I hope you'll read the stories of the characters who participated in this battle as well.

Finally, to everyone who purchased this book, those who've been reading the web version, Suzunosuke-sensei, Bunko Matsuura-sensei for the manga version, people who sent me fan letters, everyone at Ichijinsha, the ones who helped with publishing and novelization, people who sell this book, the managers who placed my books at the front of the store, all bookstore employees, the editor who supported me, my family who cheers me on, and my friends—I offer you all my most heartfelt thanks.

I hope to see all of my kindhearted readers again in the future.



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